西尾維新
NISIOISIN
Illustration take
The Thirteen Stairs
UPROOTED RADICAL
1

Right now, I’m in a graveyard.

A graveyard.
It felt like I had been here for a long time.
And I would probably continue to stay here.
As if I was here before I knew it.
I would probably stay here forever.
I was surrounded by gravestones.
The scenery stole my heart.
Of course, there was no individuality to these gravestones.
They were just arranged side by side in order.
Suddenly, I realized.
That these were the graves of the people I had killed so far.
So far...
The graves of the people who died by my fault.
Dizzily.
My body swayed.
Unstably.
The gravestones surrounding me swayed.
It was the wind's fault.
A strong wind was blowing.
A strong wind.
The wind was blowing for somebody.
The wind was blowing for somebody’s sake.
It was a ridiculous delusion.
Wind is wind.
Stone is stone.
Dead people are dead people.
Dead people are, in the end, just dead people.
Just like strangers are, in the end, just strangers.
Thinking that, I walked onward.
I walked down the path.
Surrounded by gravestones on both sides,
I walked slowly along the stone path.

It was like a labyrinth.
It was like an impasse.
The more I walked, the more I got lost.
The more I walked, the more I felt lost.
It was like I was being led somewhere.
The water there is bitter.
The water here is sweet.
That too was a ridiculous delusion.
I repeated myself.
I repeated my ridiculous delusions.
The dead.
The people who died for my sake.
But I'm sure that those men,
and I'm sure that those women,
wouldn't want me to think that their deaths were my fault.
When I realized that,
I felt like the path suddenly opened.
With an exact preciseness, the solution to the labyrinth revealed itself.
With a methodical strictness, the solution to the impasse revealed itself.
Those men.
Those women.
That boy.
That girl.
That person.
That person.
That person and that person and that person and that person.
There's no doubt that they all lived their lives to the fullest.
They didn't half-ass it.
Then.
Then I too.
Should live my life to the fullest.
Those men.

Those women.

That boy.

That girl.

That person.

That person.

That person and that person and that person and that person.

Even if they didn't wish for it.

Even if that wasn't something they wished for.

I should live according to my own will.

Enough already.

Enough acting like a child.

The pouting, the jealousy, and the feeling down.

Let’s put an end to my past self.

If I don’t do that, I...

I'm sure I could not even continue living.

And then;

I arrived in front of a gravestone.

There was no path anymore.

There was no other path anymore.

This was the end.

The end of the world.

The end of the Story.

The end of the irreplaceable Story.

On that gravestone, there was no inscription.

No letters were engraved.

No words were engraved.

No names were engraved.

This was...

Whose grave was this?

Maybe it belonged to the sacred young savant girl with the blue hair.

Or maybe it belonged to Humanity's Strongest Contractor with the red hair.

Or maybe it belonged to the final existence with the orange

hair.
Or maybe...

That was my grave.

And then I woke up.
I was greeted by the morning, as usual.
This was not a graveyard.
And I was not surrounded by gravestones.
I sighed.
I raised my bangs and corrected my breathing.
And, like always,
I longed for someone to be by my side.

Now then.
This is the final story.
This is the end, the last act.
The all-encompassing festival.
From cover to cover,
a radically uprooted story.
Just like always,
even more than like always,
untroubled and casually,
without caring or feeling burdened; let's talk.
Even if there’s no longer a world to talk about.
Even then, the story still exists.

0

I can't like anyone.

1

Saitou Takashi.

Thirty-nine years ago in March, he was born in a hospital in Tokyo to his father, Saitou Kengo, and his mother, Saitou Masami. A baby boy born under two older sisters. His father was a professor of human biology at Takatsu University and a private practitioner. His mother was a musician. His two sisters were twins and they had a gap in age of 10 years to him.

From infancy, Kengo and the staff around him gave him a special education. Thus he spent the majority of his days at Takatsu University. It is said that without ever reading a single academic book, he would assemble theories from scratch in his head, consequently resulting in the media picking up the sensational story of the prodigy. The fact that most of what Kengo had presented to the scientific world, no, that nearly all of it was made possible because of his son's help was later made clear by a whistleblower.

In April, at the age of six, he officially joined the Department of Human Biology at Takatsu University. In July of the same year, he graduated and in September, he advanced to Takatsu University's graduate school, graduating the following March. At the age of seven, he literally passed every program in the various departments at the university’s graduate school without any trouble.

At the age of eight, after all this, he joined the laboratory of his father, Kengo. At the time, Kengo was conducting research on the vague and obscure subject of "The Process Towards the

End of Collective Life," and unusually, or rather, mysteriously, without any problems to speak of, without any particular incidents, the research proceeded normally.

Normally.

Too normally.

So normally that, thinking back,

it was abnormal, and it stood out.

And then, he turned ten years old.

In July, when he was ten years old, his two elder sisters went missing.

At the time, they were twenty years old and were both students at Takatsu University. They were also involved with their father's research, though not to the extent of their younger brother. In those days, the Saitou family was reasonably wealthy, thanks in part to the efforts of their son, who was active in many fields. Therefore, the disappearance of the two was hypothesized to be a kidnapping, but with no demands from the supposed culprit, the two sisters' names were simply and concisely added to the list of the many *missing persons* in the country. And just like that, there was only one child left in the Saitou household.

At eleven years old, he was promoted to assistant professor.

At thirteen years old, both parents died.

At almost the same time, he submitted his letter of resignation to Takatsu University.

After that he moved to the United States, where he committed himself to an academic organisation in Texas: The enormous, integrated, and united- ER2 System (now the ER3 System). Of course he did not join as a student of the program, but rather as a researcher. It is said that he worked under Assistant Professor Hewlett, who is said to possess the single greatest mind in the world of academics.

However, for Saitou Takashi, this ER period was a particularly dark era in his career.

Despite the vast global influence of the ER system, it is

strangely insular in nature; the results of its research are almost never revealed to the outside. Everything is top secret. Everything is a black box. Of course, for scholars wishing for that kind of environment, for those who loathe the annoying hustle and bustle of the world, it's probably the best place to be. Everyone considered Saitou Takashi's intent to be so, and understood it to be so.

However, that wasn't the case.

In January, at the age of eighteen, he returned to Japan by himself.

In March of his nineteenth year, he returned to the Department of Human Biology at Takatsu University as a professor and also started a private practice. So, on the surface, he was following perfectly in the steps of his father, Kengo.

Only on the surface.

It’s presumed that around this time, he started working unofficially on the study of life: The "study of not dying", as it was called. Along with Kigamine Yaku and Madoka Kuchiha, who were both high school students at the time.

Then two years later,

at the age of twenty-one, he moved to the United States again. Rather than returning to ER2, he and his two associates set up their own organization.

The names of those two are still in the records.

One was Kajou Akira.

The other was Aikawa Junya.

However, even though it was an independent organization, five year later it was absorbed into the ER2 system. The name was also changed from the Japanese one, taken from the initials of him and his two associates, to the model number MS-2.

By being incorporated into the ER2 System, his career from then on entered a dark era once again. It’s not at all known what rank he held within the ER2 system. It can be said for sure, however, that he was in a different position from when he was a teenager.

At this time, he had already finished learning.

At this time, he had already finished his research.

All he had to do was put it into practice.

All he had to do was experiment.

Eventually, that dark era ended.

Three years later, in the summer of his twenty-ninth year, he would return to Japan once again.

However, this time he was not alone, but accompanied by his two associates, Kajou Akira and Junya Aikawa, a servant, and... a daughter.

The purpose of his sudden return to Japan remains unknown to this day. Whatever it may have been, it's clear that it was never realised. That is because everyone who came to Japan in the winter of that year died.

Even Kajou Akira.

Even Aikawa Junya.

Even the servant.

Even the daughter.

Even himself.

Because they died.

It was a murder.

Clearly a murder.

In the end, the culprit was never found.

And so, we arrive at the present.

Saitou Takashi. Age of death: 29.

That was something that happened about ten years ago.

"Arriving to say today's hello and tomorrow's goodnight, Yamiguchi Houko has finally come for the seventh visit to Nonsense User Onii-chan."

With that cool greeting, the thirteen year old runaway girl living in the same apartment as me, Yamiguchi Houko-chan, entered my hospital room with a basket of fruit. I had finished today's rehabilitation, as well as my health checkup, which was

basically just being harassed by the nurse in charge, Katanashi Rabumi. This meant I had plenty of free time to think about trivial things and I was currently in the midst of being lost in said thoughts. Houko-chan's visit was sudden and without any prior notice, but it made me a little happy.

Houko-chan was wearing sandals, a pure white one-piece dress, and a straw hat. When she took off the hat, dark hair in a plain bob cut could be seen. Putting the basket on the cabinet, she pulled out a pipe chair from the side of the locker and sat down beside the bed. This was her seventh visit to this hospital room and, as one would expect, she had become fully

familiarized with it.

"I met Katanashi-san earlier by the reception desk on the first floor. Apparently, you'll be discharged soon. Congratulations."

"Yeah... so you encountered Rabumi-san. It must have been difficult."

Since Rabumi-san was a pretty high tension nurse, and moreover, since Rabumi-san had taken a liking to Houko-chan, it would probably have been troublesome if she was caught in a weird situation. But Houko-chan said, "No, I ran away immediately," as if it was nothing.

Hmm.....

Well, it's not like it had been a long while.

However, with girls around this age, their atmosphere can change quickly if you don't see them for a while.....

Furthermore, she seemed to be getting cuter.

Those doll-like facial features, that white skin, those red lips.

I'm not a young girl lover like Suzunashi-san, but even then, Houko-chan could be said to be an exception.

"Hmm. Well, yes. I'm being discharged on the twentieth. It's as scheduled. But even so, the injuries healed quite quickly. I was told it would take two months to completely recover, but when I get discharged I'll apparently already be able to jump

and run around again. I can't do too much strenuous exercise, though."

"That's better than nothing."

"I've always healed pretty fast."

"It seems like it... Your hair too, even though it was cut recently, it's already nearly returned to how it was before."

"Though it's not like this haircut is the default...." I answered while playing with my bangs, which had certainly grown a lot. "Didn't I say it before? It used to be a lot longer. When I was about Houko-chan's age, I had my hair in a braid."

"That's beyond my imagination."

Houko-chan shrugged.

"The next time you want to get a haircut, please contact me."

"Yeah."

"Since Hime-nee-sama is... no longer here."

"....Yeah."

It had been a month since Hime-chan died.

A month had passed since she was killed.

Regardless of whether a person dies or not, time just passes like it always does, automatically and autonomously. Of course, this month would be no different from the one before it, and while I know that time won't be extended or shortened by my personal feelings, a month has still come and gone.

I was still in a hospital in Kyoto for the treatment of my wounds. That is, the wounds that I sustained last month when I got involved in that abominable incident related to Assistant Professor Kigamine's "Research on Immortality", where Hime-chan was killed.

However, I'd been used to getting injured for a long time (that's why my wounds healed so quickly), and so inevitably I'd been used to getting hospitalized since I was a child. To put it in other words: hospitalization was boring. Since this was a private room, the only people I could talk to were the visitors who came to visit from time to time, or Rabumi-san who would

come here to escape work from time to time, so it was boring.

To escape from that boredom, I decided to do some research.

On the man I met last month.

"....."

His name was Saitou Takashi.

No, he didn't call himself that.

From start to finish, he didn't call himself by his own name.

It was not yet the time to name himself, or so he had said.

However, even so, I knew that Assistant Professor Kigamine had been his student, so using that fact as a starting point, I personally investigated him. According to what I could find within the limitations of my skills; he was no longer alive.

Or rather, he was dead.

I was quite disappointed to see that he was not in fact dead.

If I made a request to Kunagisa or her friend *Chiikun*, Ayanami Hyou, I could get more details, but... things being as they were, I ended up feeling like I didn't want to get too involved in the situation.

In the first place, it was not an action with much meaning.

In the end, it was to escape boredom.

It was just to kill time.

He....

That fox-masked man did promise to see me again, but if another meeting was possible there'd be no hardship. Both of us didn't know the other's contact info or anything, did we?

No matter how much you wish to meet again....

If there's no connection, then that's it.

"By the way, Onii-chan. Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

"Things I want you to do?"

"Since it's one of my rare visits to Onii-chan, I'd like to do something useful for you."

"Mmm, yeah... that's an admirable attitude. Then why don't you just wipe me down like you did last time? To be honest, I

sweated a lot while I was asleep earlier."

"Understood. Is the towel in the cabinet as usual?"

"Yeah. Please. Just the upper body is fine."

I opened my hospital gown and took off my shirt. Houko-chan took a towel from the cabinet, drew water from the faucet of this private room, crawled on top of the bed, and went around to my back.

"....But you know."

Houko-chan muttered while wiping my back with the damp towel. I didn't know if it was because she was a kid, or if it was something unique to her, but it was hard to read the emotions in her voice, so I didn't know what she was going to say while I waited for her next words.

"Onii-chan's body... when I look carefully at it, it's full of scars. A mix of new ones and old ones here and there."

"Oh... well. Is that too much for a girl?"

"In my case, not so much."

"It's a relief that the scars on my cheek have disappeared relatively cleanly, though. It would've been a problem if they stood out. I don't know what people walking around with tattoos on their face feel like."

"I don't think anyone knows that."

Houko-chan held her words a bit there.

"Moeta's body is similar, but not to this point."

Moeta was the name of Houko-chan's older brother, who was two years older than her. His last name was different, though. He was named Ishinagi Moeta.

"It's probably because I'm weak, so I get hurt easily. At least, in my case."

"That may be it."

Houko-chan had no mercy.

"Even so, Onii-chan."

"What?"

"Onii-chan's body is something irreplaceable, so please take better care of yourself."

"....."

Something irreplaceable, huh.

With those words, I was reminded.

Jail Alternative.

The concept that there is a substitute for everything, that even if someone doesn't do something, someone else will do it. That in this world there's nothing irreplaceable.

And, in addition to that, Back Nozzle.

The concept that if something must happen, even if there was no sign of it until now, even if it was something that wasn't even born yet, if it must happen at all, then there's no way to avoid it. That sometime, somewhere, it will happen, and if it didn't happen, then it was something that already happened a long time ago. That there is nothing in this world that can be avoided.

Jail Alternative and Back Nozzle.

Two concepts that colored last month's case.

Both were affirmations of destiny; affirmations of the Story.

And,

denial of the individual.

Denial of a world of individuals.

"If you don't mind me trying to sound a bit cool... if I didn't get hurt, then someone else would've been hurt instead. In that case, Houko-chan, isn't it better that I was the one to get hurt?"

"That cruel way of thinking is no good." Houko-chan said. "Onii-chan, you're a bit of a coward."

"Coward?"

"Underhanded."

"Underhanded....."

"Or should I say cunning?

"....Cunning....."

Why does she have to say it that way?

"Come to think of it, Onii-chan is always like that, isn't he? It may be uncalled for advice, but I think you should be more

attentive to the ones around you."

"Even so, I'm pretty sure I'm a very thoughtful person."

"If it's your own pain, you can tolerate it. But you can't feel other people's pain. You can't tolerate it. That's what I'm talking about, Nonsense User Onii-chan. Do you understand?" Houko-chan said. "In other words, try to put yourself in the shoes of the people worried about you."

"……So you're worried about me, Houko-chan."

"Yes, I'm worried"

Houko-chan sighed as if she was fed up.

That action was not very fitting for a young girl.

Even more so for a pretty girl.

"I can't stand to watch it. It's like looking up from below at someone walking a tightrope with no pole and no safety net. It may be Onii-chan who falls off the rope, but it's actually me who's going to see the crushed corpse."

"That's a really unpleasant metaphor…."

"By the way, Nonsense User Onii-chan."

"What is it?"

"Onii-chan, I heard you confessed to Mii-nee-san."

"……"

Oops.

How did she find out?

"Hmm… it wasn't something as concrete as a confession. It's just that I'm indebted to Miiko-san, and last month… she said some rough things, you know."

Miiko-san. Asano Miiko-san.

She was a twenty-two year-old freeter who, like Houko-chan, lived in the same apartment as me. She had a samurai-like ponytail and a dignified atmosphere. She was a swordswoman who spent her days dressed in a jinbei. She was the oldest resident at the apartment and was loved by almost everyone. The one exception was Koutoumaru-san, but even then, they would fight everyday like they were having fun.

Miiko-san……

Miiko-san, huh.

I haven't seen her in a while.

In the end, she didn't come to visit me even once, so I haven't seen her for about a month.

.....

That wasn't really a confession.

However, it was something close to that.

And the fact that she didn't come visit me at the hospital....

It was somewhat hopeless.

Depressing.

Certainly, I won't deny that I was somewhat relieved, but it was still quite disappointing to get no response.

"From the looks of it, it seems like you still haven't received an answer, Nonsense User Onii-chan."

"Well....."

"I never thought that Onii-chan would have the nerve to fall for someone."

"Is that so? It's pretty easy for me to fall in love, you know."

"That's not something to be proud of."

".....No mercy."

"But if you can fall in love with someone, then it's something you can understand, right?"

"Something I can understand? What's that?"

"Please do a banzai pose."

"Yes, yes."

As commanded, I lifted up my arms. After washing the towel in the basin, Houko-chan began to wipe my armpits. Because of Houko-chan's small hands, it tickled a bit.

"When Hime-nee-sama died."

"Hmm?"

"Onii-chan, you were sad, right?"

".....That's, well, somewhat..."

Yukariki Ichihime. Hime-chan.

Even though I had only known her for about two months.

The void created by her absence....

It didn’t look like it’d be filled.

Not that I had any intention of filling it.

"Then I think that what Onii-chan should do from now on is not atonement, regret, or self-sacrifice, but to not make the ones around you sad."

"....."

"That is, if you’ll let me express my personal feelings... I don’t want to grieve for the people I love. I don’t want to worry about the people I love."

Houko-chan declared with a strong, determined voice that was unusual for the girl.

"If there are people who will be sad if I get hurt, then, with an iron will, I will refuse to get hurt. I will never get hurt so that the people I love don’t get sad."

"....."

"I wish for Onii-chan to be like that too."

While she was wiping the other side of my body, I put down my arms. I took a breath and thought over the meaning of what Houko-chan said.

Well, she was right.

It was somewhat painful to just be told off, though.

But this girl really had no mercy.

".....Thank you. I’ll wipe the front myself."

"That's normal. Were you really thinking of making me do that?"

"Give me the towel."

"Okay."

Though, having said that, Houko-chan didn't give me the towel. I found it odd, so I tried to turn back, but because of the heavy load that clung to my back, this action was interrupted.

"......Houko-chan?"

"A little."

With her lightly clinging to my back, with her soft arms around my neck, Houko-chan said with a small, vanishing voice.

"Let me stay like this for a little."

".....Houko-chan?"

"Just five more seconds in this pose."

"....."

I heard the sound of heartbeats.

The sound of my heartbeat and the sound of Houko-chan's heartbeat.

Both of them were beating quickly, like a bell.

I couldn't say anything.

My mouth wouldn't open.

I couldn't turn back.

And so, while remaining still like that, time passed.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Four seconds.

Then five seconds...

".....Am I interrupting?"

The door of the hospital room opened and Miiko-san entered.

The sound of my heartbeat stopped.

No, if it stopped I'd die.

I thought I was dead.

"....."

Explanation of the situation.

Private room.

On the bed.

A half naked nineteen year old.

A thirteen year old (pretty girl) clinging onto his back.

Their two bodies in contact.

Miiko-san's cold gaze.

.....

There was no need for words between us.

We were able to communicate even without such a thing.

"……Well then."

Houko-chan untied the arms around my neck, got off the bed, and put on her sandals.

"Nonsense User Onii-chan. Sorry, even though I just arrived, I must go to the library. So Miiko-san, please take your time."

"……Yeah."

"....."

I directed a gaze asking for help towards Houko-chan, who had passed by Miiko-san's side and was about to walk out of the hospital room, but all she did was point her fingers at her cheeks and made a cute pose that didn't fit her cool appearance at all.

"Nonsense User Onii-chan."

Houko-chan then said.

"Even I can get jealous."

"....."

"Then, I wish you good health, friendship, and reunions."

With those parting words, she closed the door.

Only two people were left in the hospital room.

Me and Miiko-san.

I hadn't seen her in a month.

Cold air drifted into the hospital room.

As if feeling that cold air, Miiko-san stared at the fruit basket on top of the cabinet.

She seemed somewhat sleepy. But in her case, that was the norm. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, she had a simple inexpressiveness. In that aspect, she was similar to Houko-chan.

In the meantime, I put my shirt back on and closed the front of my hospital gown.

"Inoji."

"……Yes."

"A thirteen year old is bad, don't you think?"

"No... that's not it....." in response to that critical tone, I denied with all my being. "That's... she was washing my sweat and..."

"Hmm. It's fine. It doesn't matter to me at all."

"……"

She was angry.

Miiko-san was a straightforward person, but this kind of anger was rare.

It was hard to deal with.

"Umm... did you come here with Houko-chan?"

"Yeah. Only, I was caught by a strange nurse at the reception desk. Houko managed to escape, but as for me..."

It was no good, Miiko-san said.

I see....

Houko-chan said "I was", now that I thought about it.

So, as I thought, Houko-chan... It was a premeditated crime. I wondered if this was yet another one of Nanananami's plans... No, it wasn't venomous enough for it to have been one of that witch's schemes. That means it was Houko-chan's own decision.

Jealousy, she said.

Jealousy, huh……

Envy, jealousy.

Well, Miiko-san was a very popular person at the apartment. Houko-chan was very fond of Miiko-san, so it wouldn't be surprising if my pseudo-confession was seen by her as an attempt at getting ahead.

"Inoji is popular."

"……"

"It looked like the nurse from earlier was very fond of you. And that blue haired girl has this recharging thing... and people from the apartment come to your room all the time."

"……"

The unpleasant attack began.

I had no other choice but to resign myself and receive it.

"And your part time job is tutoring middle school girls."

"I was already fired from that....."

If you're hospitalized for a month, it's natural.

Well, since Hime-chan died, most of her school fees were returned to my bank account, so my livelihood returned to normal.

"And you often go hang out with that weird red haired woman."

Miiko-san's attack still continued. She had yet to realize that Houko-chan's earlier actions were not aimed towards me, but towards Miiko-san herself. It seemed like an easy thing to realize, but Miiko-san was quite thickheaded. Despite showing an unusually sharp intuition when it came to others, when it came to herself, she was slow to the point that it became hard to understand how she could be so dense.

"And it seems you make regular contact with that female detective. And last month you lived with a nympho, and that nympho picked up a girl."

"Nympho...."

Was it Kasugai-san?

I don't know about that, she.....

"And... and....."

"No, no more..."

"And also, you confessed to me."

"....."

"On top of that, you didn't come back at all."

I looked at Miiko-san's face.

I saw... nothing out of the ordinary.

It was the usual blank expression.

".....As you can see, I'm currently hospitalized."

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be discharged in about four days, though."

"Yeah, I heard earlier." Miiko-san nodded. "I'm glad it

wasn’t anything serious."

"It was a close call, though....."

Truly... It seemed like it was truly a close call.

I had walked the line between life and death.

Not metaphorically.

Literally.

That's how much...

Last month's case was abnormal, I guess.

"But Miiko-san, my consciousness came back a while ago, so... couldn't you have come to visit me? I was lonely."

"That's my bad." Miiko-san bowed her head in an unexpectedly honest manner. "It’s just that, not to say the same thing as Hou, but... I had some hesitation as well."

"Hesitation?"

"About how to answer you."

"....."

Confession... huh.

Like I said to Houko-chan: even I don’t know whether that was a confession or not. Or if that was just me obscuring things with nonsense and expressing ideas vaguely to escape from reality as always. I truly don't know.

In that situation.

At that place.

At that time.

What did I say?

What was the meaning of the words I spoke?

In the first place, the situation was unique.

So, once I returned to my everyday life.

As expected, I began to feel self-conscious.

In that sense, it might very well be escapism.

Being afraid of the answer.

Being afraid of the result.

Staying still forever.

Not changing, like always.

Before Hime-chan died....

The seemingly unchanging me.

"Please, think about your response."

That's certainly what I said.

What was I thinking exactly?

Didn't I want to not get hurt?

With this many wounds already covering my body.

With this many wounds already covering my soul.

With a heart full of scars.

That was, truly, nonsense.

If I were to get hurt....

Would there be any people who'd be sad?

"You know, Inoji. I...."

Miiko-san said.

"I'm pretty much no good as a person."

"....What?" In response to those uncharacteristic words from Miiko-san, I tilted my head. "What's that? What does that mean?"

"My only talent is swinging my sword."

"Those words... I've already heard them before."

"I'm no good. Especially when it comes to love affairs."

"....."

"I'm quite thickheaded."

"I understand that, but...."

"Well... it's not something to hide, so I'll just say it." Miiko-san continued with practically no expression. "Up until now, I've gone out with four people."

"Yeah."

I had already predicted that.

Well, she was three years older than me.

So I was already prepared for that.

"Amongst them, three were women."

.....Unexpected.

Umm.....

".....And the last one, was he a man?"

"Rather, the first one," Miiko-san said. "It was when I was

in middle school, so I'd say it was a boy, rather than a man."

"....."

So she even counted up to middle school.....

She was so serious.

"You see, that boy was bullied."

"....."

"After that, there was one more during middle school. Then there were two during high school. All of them were women, and all of them were bullied."

"....."

"I liked people who were bullied. No, that's not it... weak people, I think I probably liked weak people."

"That's an unpleasant analysis....."

"No, this isn't something you should joke about, it's serious," Miiko-san said. "Essentially, I was someone who liked helping people... that's what I think. Saying that 'not paying any mind to righteousness is bravery' sounds great on paper, but it wasn't something that beautiful."

"Yeah....."

"It went too far, and I ended up dropping out of high school... did I already tell you about that?"

"Yeah... though not in such detail. In other words... um, you protected those kids who got bullied? Regardless of whichever one it was."

"Whichever one, or rather, both."

"Both?"

"I was a two-timer."

"....."

No good.

No good, no good.

This person... when it came to love, was truly no good.

Or maybe, rather, someone who was romantically tone-deaf....

"It would've been fine if that was all."

"No, it already wasn't fine."

"Those four didn't really grow as people by going out with me. They ended up even weaker."

"I see."

"They ended up even weaker."

"Enough to say it twice....."

.....Well, if you spoil someone getting bullied, that's generally what happens. It's a shame, but that's reality. I was somewhat like that myself, so it was an easy story to understand.

Myself?

I see.....

I see. It was a story about me. It was both Miiko-san's story and my story at the same time.

"In other words, I...." Miiko-san faced me. "I'm a specialist at making broken people even worse."

"That's a bad talent."

"Therefore, I hesitate."

"....."

"You, if you were to go out with me, would you be fine?"

"Be fine....."

"Do you think you'd be fine?"

It was a direct question.

Miiko-san looked into my eyes.

I regretted the fact that Houko-chan had gone home. This tense atmosphere that was exploding like a spark between Miiko-san and myself made me feel that the one just before wasn't so bad.

".....Miiko-san."

"I know my own weakness. It's something Suzunashi-san has often told me... Yeah, I am probably too soft. I poke my nose in other people's business. Even though they could recover by themselves, I extend my hands towards them."

"....."

"I can't watch over them. That's my weakness."

"But Miiko-san---"

"That's why I'm very careful about keeping my distance from other people," Miiko-san said, ignoring my interjection while forcefully tying her words together. "Maintaining a distance... and measuring the space in-between."

Miiko-san's sense of distance was pleasant.

Without useless meddling.

Without holding useless concerns.

But not without any meddling.

But not without holding any concern.

That was probably the main reason why Miiko-san was so well-liked in that apartment full of weirdos. It was like staying by her side was always natural, or rather, she wasn't annoying, she possessed unique spacing.

To put it simply:

Miiko-san was a pleasant person.

"But... if we were to go out, that distance would probably be lost. I'd lose control."

"....."

"I'd surely spoil you to death. I would completely take over all the work that you should be doing. Honestly, you would probably be the type that stimulates that part in me."

"So I'm a kid being bullied?"

"Yes."

She nodded at me.

But still, Miiko-san said.

"It seems you've been working hard."

"....."

"Regardless of whether it's conscious or not." Miiko-san crossed her arms. She seemed to be choosing her words. In the first place, she wasn't someone who spoke a lot. Though, if I had to say, she was more of a poor talker than a quiet person. "Well, you almost gave up last month... but even then, you were doing your best."

"Even if you say I did my best, I'm still in this miserable state. It's not exactly like what Houko-chan said the other day,

but recently it feels like the hospital is my home."

"…….I don't want to bother you."

Without addressing my joke, Miiko-san went quiet.

Her words didn't continue.

It seemed to be the end.

I don't want to bother you... With that, it was finished.

I racked my brain.

"Umm... in other words..."

"Yes?"

"So what's the conclusion?"

"Yes."

Miiko-san nodded,

and only said the conclusion.

"You and I can't go out together."

"……."

Uwaah.

I was flatly rejected.

From the front,

without the possibility of evasion,

fairly and unapologetically,

I was rejected.

The shock of it made me feel a little dizzy.

……What was it, last month's behavior……..

"I hesitated, but I think that we shouldn't go out together."

"We can't……"

"We would ruin each other."

Even before having gone out together, that reason……

It was too much.

"I don't want to become ruined. And also, I don't want to ruin you. Then it's doubly ruined."

"……."

"I'm too overprotective. I'd probably forgive you for everything. I don't think that's a good thing. Well, when she was clinging to your back earlier, it was probably a joke, but unless it's someone strict like Hou, unless it's a human who

possesses no mercy, they probably **could not let you live**. I'm no good. I can't be with you."

"I am..."

A little surprised.

At me trying to persist.

At me being bad at giving up.

I was rejected, and instead of feeling sad or hurt or disappointed, I still hadn't given up and was trying to cling on. So I was a little surprised.

At that point, I finally realised it.

Ah, that's it.

I truly liked Miiko-san.

I wanted to be by her side.

No matter how much pain would accompany it.

"I want to go out with you, Miiko-san. So then, why not?"

"……..You and I, I think we have good compatibility."

"That's……"

That's... a bad habit.

Something that fuels hope.

That's no comfort to me.

"**Between you who wants to be liked by someone... and me who wants to like someone**, certainly, the compatibility is good. However, if only the compatibility is good, then it's not enough. We could make it work as friends, but beyond that, it seems like the balance..."

"The balance?"

"No... like I thought, it's the distance, I guess. We wouldn't be able to keep a comfortable distance. It would become something really sticky. We would probably flirt all day. I could see it."

"……."

I couldn't see such a thing, though.

But... would it become like that?

Going out with someone, would it be like that?

I.....

It's not like I wished for something like that.

Just with Miiko-san.

"That may bring happiness... but I hate sticky human relationships. Because of past experiences."

"That's...."

That's the same for me.

However, with Miiko-san, it wasn't like that.

No...Was I wrong?

No, no, it wasn't like that.

That's right, I understood it well.

Wanting to like someone.

Wanting to be liked by someone.

Those words... that expression, it was true.

It was correct.

Even though Houko-chan had said it, in reality it was not that. It was not that I was a human who couldn't like anyone... I couldn't be liked by anyone, that's the kind of human I was.

I couldn't get people to like me.

It's the inverse.

It's upside down.

The opposite of love, the opposite of affection. They're words that are used often. The opposite of love is hatred and the opposite of affection is disgust. That shouldn't be wrong.

I just wanted to be liked by someone, and if I just chose Miiko-san to be that someone... **If I wanted to be liked by Miiko-san, if I wished for that, then that'd mean**....

"Then... Miiko-san."

"Yes?"

"If I...."

If I wasn't the person that I am now.

If I was firm, if I had my feet on the ground.

If I became like that.

If I changed like that.

At that time, would you--

Suddenly, the door opened.

I thought Houko-chan had come back.

The timing was just too good to be true.

Houko-chan must have been listening on the other side of the door, that's what I thought.

However, I was wrong.

I was completely wrong.

I put my guard up at once.

The one standing there... was an unknown man.

A man I'd never seen before.

"It's my cool entrance scene... so open up your ears for my next line...."

The man pointed at me and Miiko-san.

His right hand at Miiko-san.

His left hand at me.

"My name is Kino Raichi, Twelfth Step of the *Thirteen Stairs*. As casually as possible, please call me Kinoracchi."

Behind the man....

The door slowly closed.

As if he was enclosing us within.

Without thinking, I swallowed.

Thirteen Stairs.

That was the starting signal.

Thirteen Stairs.

Those words, other than the simple meaning of thirteen stairs, held a special meaning for me and for a small number of other people.

For example, last month.

The reason why I was still in this hospital, even now, was because of that *pair* who were both members of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

People called them the Niounomiya siblings of massacre magic.

The horror of it penetrated deep into my body.

However, that's not **the reason**.

That's not why the words *Thirteen Stairs* made me feel a certain kind of shiver. It wasn't the usual; it had a more direct meaning.

It was because those *Thirteen Stairs* were, to put it plainly, a unit under the direct control of that fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi, the one who swore to meet me again.

Literally his *Stairs*.

For one of those *Stairs* to be in this hospital, at the coordinates where the Nonsense User resided, that fact alone.

It meant that the time had finally come.

That what should happen was finally happening.

That shiver assaulted me.

Finally, finally, it began. Was that what it meant?

Last month's continuation... No.

The end of everything.

"Kino... Raichi."

He was a man with a toned body. He might have worked out,

but rather than having muscles, he was simply toned. I couldn't see it otherwise. In addition to his thin clothes, it seemed like he had a slim figure if looked at from afar. However, he didn't seem unreliable.

Long black hair and an Alice band.

Since his eyes were hidden by flashy sunglasses resembling those of bicycle racers, it was hard to read his expression, but his mouth was loose and warped. He wore loose-fitting knee-length pants with a bicycle chain as a belt. On both feet, he wore getas that felt far too unnatural on the hospital's linoleum floor.

"Umm...."

Kino Raichi---Kino-san looked at me and Miiko-san in turn.

"As for myself, I have heard a lot about you from Mr. Fox, so meeting you face to face feels like **I finally met you**, but... for you, that shouldn't be the case. This meeting should be quite sudden. Even then, you haven't changed your expression at all, you haven't moved your shoulders one bit, that's pretty impressive, huh?"

"....."

What Kino-san said wasn't accurate.

I'd been thinking about this encounter for a long time. From the moment I woke up from my coma in the hospital last month, this meeting had been on my mind.

That's why I wasn't especially surprised.

If I had a question it would have been why the fox-masked man didn't come to this hospital on his own, instead sending a subordinate, a *Thirteen Stairs* or whatever. That was about it.

So... in other words, it still wasn't *the time*, was that it? It wasn't yet the time for him **to identify himself** to me, was that what it meant?

Then this man, Kino Raichi.

Why had he come here?

Depending on the situation, it could be bad.

Above all else, the worst thing was Miiko-san's presence here.

Miiko-san was a complete outsider, a respectable person. She was a resident of what Kunagisa would call the surface world, the normal world. There was no way that I'd involve her. Let alone with *Thirteen Stairs*, Miiko-san probably didn't even know the name Saitou Takashi.

No matter what, I couldn't get her involved.

I needed to let her escape somehow.

But that's not as easy as it sounded in my head, was it....?

Thirteen Stairs.

The twelfth step, he said.

When I heard it last month, I'm sure he said that half of them weren't even present yet... then this might mean that for the fox-masked man, *the situation was ready*.

The twelfth, huh.....

I couldn't imagine him being on the level of Izumu-kun... I couldn't see Izumu-kun and Kino-san possessing abilities of the same level.

I mean, Izumu-kun---Izumu the *Man Eater*.

He was even a match for that Aikawa Jun....

'Why did he come here'. That's what you're thinking, right? *Ii-chan*." Kino-san leaned his back against the door and, without coming closer to me, continued his story. "But well, be at ease for now. It's not something that important. It's just a visit, an errand from Mr. Fox."

An errand.....

Kino-san grinned and then laughed.

"I see... so you're Mr. Fox's *enemy*."

"....."

"For the last week or so, I was really excited to see the face of the man that Mr. Fox chose to be his enemy. But I'm surprised. As one would expect of that guy, his way of choosing enemies is different."

Saying that, Kino-san took his glasses off.

Then he glared at me with his eyes.

"To think that *Ii-chan* was a woman."

"....."

"....."

I glanced at Miiko-san.

Miiko-san glanced at me.

.....Huh?

What's that?

Was there a misunderstanding?

Even though my hair had grown, it wasn't like it had grown that much compared to how it was before, and since the lines of my body were visible in this hospital gown, it wasn't **that kind** of misunderstanding.

However, then that meant.

"For being a woman, you have a fearless look. Even in my world, there's not that many who have eyes as resolved as those. You have good eyes, *Ii-chan*"

"....."

"Compared to those, that kid besides you has really poor eyes. It looks like he got frightened by my appearance and could cry at any moment. Don't worry, I won't bully you. I don't know who you are and I don't want to, the one I came to see is just that *Ii-chan* next to you."

"....."

"....."

Crap.....

Another idiot.

This guy... what did he hear from the fox-masked man?

No matter how you look at it, I'm the one hospitalized, right?

I'm the one lying on the bed, right?

Miiko-san is sitting on a chair, right?

How exactly do you come to that misunderstanding.....

.....

Ah.

I see, so he chose by appearance.

"Mm?"

However, it seemed he noticed that something was off, so he wasn't that much of an idiot. Kino-san gave Miiko-san and me a questioning look.

"What? You haven't said anything in a while, but... you, maybe you're not *Ii-chan*?"

"No."

The one who answered was Miiko-san.

"I'm definitely *Ii-chan*."

".....Miiko-san!?"

"Miiko becomes Mii-chan. When you repeat it in your head, the first sound disappears, and that becomes Ii-chan."

Miiko-san said so,

and got up from the chair without any sound.

"You just be silent and watch, Suzuki Tarou-kun."

"....."

Again an obvious fake name.....

Rather, Miiko-san, what----

"And? Umm... Kino... what does this guy, Kino, want with this *Ii-chan*? It's not like it's just a visit, right? Guys who say they *don't have any special business*, generally, are the ones with extremely troublesome business."

"Hmm... that impudent attitude. It seems you're really *Ii-chan*."

"That's right. I am impudent."

Miiko-san puffed out her chest and put on airs.

.....Do I really have that kind of image?

But this was bad.

The situation I had feared came to pass so easily.

Considering Miiko-san's personality, I knew that she'd try to protect me first, but even then, I didn't expect the other party to make the arrangements. If this was the enemy's scheme, then it was something reminiscent of the great strategist, Shiogi-chan, but it didn't seem Kino-san had that

much intellect, so it could only be bad luck.

Luck... no, destiny?

There was no avoiding it, was that it?

But Miiko-san was bad.

Letting her get involved was bad.

Should I call for help.....

I immediately thought of the nurse call button behind me, but the *Thirteen Stairs* and the fox-masked man behind it were too dangerous to call for help here.

"Hehehe... But even so, that's quite a foolish question, *Ii-chan*. What business, you say? Even if it comes down to my life, it's not something I can say out loud, since I'm what you could call a pro player." Kino-san said, adding, Oops, you're an amateur. "Setting aside my business, *Ii-chan*. What I'm about to do, isn't it obvious? If you're a woman, then why don't you guess? We're a man and a woman facing each other, you know?"

"....."

Kino-san put his sunglasses back on.

Then suddenly, he raised his voice.

"**There's nothing they'd do besides killing each other!**"

"Killing each other, I see."

Thud.

A sound just like that was generated.

In the next moment, Miiko-san was in front of Kino-san.

From the side of the bed to the front of the door.

She slid her feet in a way that it seemed like she teleported.

"Oh... uh, oh?"

Flustered, Kino-san tried to step back, but since his back was still on the door, his movements were sealed. There was a wall to his left so, essentially, Kino-san had been immediately cornered by Miiko-san.

"Y, You---"

"Surprisingly, you can't do anything at this distance."

The distance between Kino-san and Miiko-san was already

only a few centimeters. Certainly, at this distance they were too close to each other for him to take any action. Even if he wanted to create some distance, he was blocked by the wall and the door.

"Guh... wh- what? That weird movement---"

"It's not weird. It's just normal footwork in kendo."

Saying that, Miiko-san stepped backwards and, without leaving her opponent time to breathe,

She swung her right arm.

Click-clack.

This time, it was a light but flashy sound.

In her right hand was a shiny black expandable baton. It was the one that Miiko-san carried around with her on a daily basis and said that it was for self-defense. Earlier, when Kino-san was rambling on about something, she casually took it out from her person.

What a person.

In this situation, she was already prepared.

"You should take off your sunglasses and your Alice band, just in case."

Miiko-san said, and then took a stance.

The jodan-no-kamae.

"A head-on blow might leave you blind."

"I heard that you had no connection to combat, but...." Kino-san distanced himself from the wall and the door and, as if searching for an opportunity, faced Miiko-san. "Kendo, you said? Hmm, kendo, huh...."

"....."

I was completely left behind.

It seemed I couldn't participate.

That's right....

Miiko-san was pretty strong.

At the very least, to the extent that I was not worthy of being her opponent.

Pretty strong... and, on top of that,

quite quick to lose her temper.

Hot blooded.

Even though it'd been a while since she'd turned twenty, her simple, unassuming demeanor made it hard to believe that she had such a rough temperament at heart. From the fact that when Suzunashi-san, *that* Suzunashi-san who was also called Violence Neon, formed a duo with Miiko-san she always played the role of the pacifier, you can imagine the level of Miiko-san's brutality.

At the word "kendo," Kino-san stopped his frivolous talk, as if he was now cautious.

He probably sensed it... I think.

Kendo.

It was a far too common word, one that you'd hear on a daily basis. At middle schools and high schools, it was a *sport* you could learn, so it seemed like it was overlooked.....

Kendo was distinctly different from other common martial arts.

After that incident in July, I'd tagged along with Miiko-san for her early morning training, and I was able to get a feel for it. Miiko-san taught kendo to the kids in the neighborhood from time to time, so that's why I asked her, but the answer I got from Miiko-san was "If you want to do it for your health like the kids that's one thing, but.... if you want self-defense, then don't do kendo."

Right.

Kendo wasn't for self-defense.

Furthermore, it wasn't even for combat.

It was a means to kill.

With a sharp sword, cut your opponent's wrists, throat, body, and forehead.

Of course, there's also the goal of maintaining a dignified spirit.

But no matter what you say, that's the basis of it.

Cut.

Cut.

Cut... a human.

Cut a life.

Miiko-san said that for someone following the path of the sword, they must at the very least have that degree of resolve.

That degree of resolve.

The resolve to kill someone.

That's right.

The art of kendo could kill someone.

Even if the tool wasn't a blade but a baton, it was the same thing....

"....."

However, this was no joke.

No matter how strong Miiko-san was, even if her skill was on par with Japan's top class, even if kendo was a means to kill....

Thirteen Stairs.

Even if not to the extent of Izumu-kun, there was no doubt Kino-san was an inhuman existence.....

"......Hehehe."

Kino-san grabbed his half pants, removed the chain he used as a belt, and coiled it around his arm. It seemed that just like the delinquent students of the past, he intended to use that chain as a weapon. I wonder if upon seeing that Miiko-san's weapon was a baton, he chose the best suited weapon.

Anyway, this was bad.

The way the situation was going was bad.

Since it's come to this, it can't be helped. If I gave my name, then at least for now, Kino-san's interest would be diverted from Miiko-san. That was the only solution in this case. If I was alone, I would choose to escape, but in this case, I couldn't really say that. If Kino-san really was a subordinate of that fox-masked man, then at the very least, since we hadn't yet met again at this point, I probably wouldn't get killed.

Because... this situation.

Compared to last month, it couldn't be said to be the worst....

"Don't say anything unnecessary, Suzuki Tarou-kun."

Just when I was about to call Kino-san's name, Miiko-san, without diverting her gaze from Kino-san, said with a voice so strong it could kill.

"I'm not a fool... I can tell by his presence that he's not someone normal. But if I had to say, that's the no-good part of me talking."

"Miiko-san---"

"Subconsciously, I want to protect you."

She advanced towards Kino-san by one step.

"Even though my only talent is swinging my sword, I meddle. I can't stand to just look. I can't restrain myself when someone gets hurt in front of me."

I can't watch people get hurt.

My body.

My spirit.

They have too many scars to count.

"That's why... I can't be with you," Miiko-san said. "When I look at you, I'm reminded of my own faults... because you and I, in some respects, are extremely similar."

Similar... to me.

I am similar to everyone.

Without individuality,

and,

possessing various defects.

Possessing every defect of other people.

In this case.

Asano Miiko's defect....

"**I'd rather get hurt and die first than see someone else get hurt in front of me**." Miiko-san took one step further. "I simply want to like people."

"....."

"Then let's get this started.....!"

Miiko-san suddenly stepped in.

With the earlier "normal kendo footwork."

This time with a yell, she raised her baton.

Swiftly, like slicing through the air.

But with a surprisingly flexible form.

She raised her baton.

And swung down.

"Uuooooooooh!"

And Kino-san's reaction to that was....

Something truly lame.

Flinging away his chain, he jumped to the side and dodged Miiko-san's attack. No, it wasn't something tight enough to call it "dodging" from an observer's perspective. It was no different than just falling down. On top of that, there was a locker in the direction of where he jumped to, and he hit his head hard against it.

"Wha... hey, hey seriously?! You really wanted to hit my head with that metal baton?! Idiot, someone could easily die from that kind of thing, you know?! Someone who's not even a *Killing Name* can't do something like that without hesitation! Are you crazy or what?!"

"....."

Miiko-san watched Kino-san's shameless and miserable screaming for just a moment before her gaze turned cold....

And she readied her second attack.

Of course, there was no such thing as an attack on a fallen opponent in kendo, but when it came to kenjutsu, it was a different story. In the first place, Miiko-san was a swordswoman before she was a kendoist.

"Hiiiiiiiii!"

With a pathetic scream.

Kino-san clumsily rolled to the side again.

The end of the baton hit the locker.

The stainless steel locker....

Was torn apart along the path of Miiko-san's sword.

".....Wai-hey, that's not funny!" With a loud voice, Kino-san continued to yell out. "I-I'll die! I'll really die! Tha-that fucking Mr. Fox, what was with his 'You'll absolutely not die.' This is fucked up!"

There's no way you'll die.....?

What's that?

What's the meaning behind that?

But Kino-san had no time to continue talking. He bent as if doing a somersault and began crawling through the cramped hospital room. He reached the door and tried to stand up, but as if his body was paralyzed, he failed. With a "Wait wait wait!" to Miiko-san who had already caught up and was about to swing down the baton at the top of his head, he raised his hands and showed his intent to surrender. It wasn't an act. Kino-san was really fearing Miiko-san and had tears in his eyes.

"I-it's a lie!"

"....."

"It's a lie, I said it's a lie! It's a bluff, I was joking about killing each other! I just wanted to say something cool! Even if I'm in the *Thirteen Stairs*, I'm not a fighter! Don't put me together with the *Niounomiya Siblings* you fought last time!"

".....No."

Even then, Miiko-san didn't loosen her stance.

"Maybe you're saying that to try and fool me."

"Wh-what?"

"Since I'm easy to fool, I need to be careful."

"How the fuck do you expect me to fool you in this situation?! Ah, no, I mean, how do you expect me to fool you?!"

Kino-san's choice of words had turned formal.

How should I say it, it was too pitiful.

It's not like I couldn't understand, but... yeah, even if you were to call it kendo, you still wouldn't typically see that kind of relentless focus on a person's vital points. Honestly, even I wasn't expecting it. Miiko-san's impulsiveness... It had been a while since I last saw it, but... now I understood the suffering

Suzunashi-san typically had to go through.

But, even then……

This was the *Thirteen Stairs*?

This was a member of the group trying to end the world?

"H-hey, that kid too, don't just be silent and watch! You get it by watching, right? This Onee-chan is seriously bad news! You… do you intend to just sit there and let someone get murdered!?"

"Really, what did you come here for?"

I inadvertently interrupted Kino-san out of my usual habit. In response to those words, as if he suddenly remembered something, Kino-san searched through his pockets and took out a letter.

It was a white envelope.

Kino-san offered that envelope to Miiko-san.

"I-I just came… to deliver this."

"……"

"It's a letter from Mr. Fox… to you."

"……"

"No, I was told that I could meddle a bit, so I wanted to confirm your condition… Th-that was my bad. I apologize. Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. A prank. It was a prank! O-of course it was a joke, *Ii-chan*! You were surprised, right?! Right?!"

"……"

After a few moments of silence, Miiko-san let out a light sigh and finally took the envelope offered to her.

"Go."

She said.

"What……?"

"I will let you escape, so go."

"Wh-what a generous person!" As if worshipping Miiko-san, Kino-san crossed his arms and went on his knees. "You are like a goddess! Truly godly! S-so this unworthy me, Kino Raichi, will let myself be spoiled by your words and---"

"Kino-san."

"Y-yes?! What is it!?"

Kino-san was even formal with me.

He was a small fry to the point that it was sad.

It was weird coming from me, but it truly had been a long time since I'd seen such a small fry of a character. At the very least, it had been a few months. If this was a scene in a young adult fiction novel, he'd certainly be the type of character that wouldn't get illustrated.

"You are... an ally of Mr. Fox, right?"

"....."

As expected, the fact that not *Ii-chan* but *I* brought up Mr. Fox made Kino-san look suspicious. But ignoring that, without a moment's delay, I threw him a question.

"Why?"

"....Why what?"

Perhaps because the topic of the conversation switched to the fox-masked man, the pathetic feeling disappeared from Kino-san's voice and it instead became something heavy. I was about to feel timid, but I resisted that.

"That man... he said he wants to see the end of the world."

"....."

"A human being possessing that dangerous idea, the worst idea in the world... why would you follow someone like that?"

I couldn't ask Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan that.

Or Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan either.

I couldn't ask.

Why?

Why follow that man?

Why even think about sharing fate with a man like that?

"If the world ends, **your** place in it would disappear too, right? Maybe you could see the end, but at that time, you would end too. It's not like I can't understand the feeling of wanting to see the moment the world ends, but... ending means **not continuing**. It's not like you don't understand that, right?"

"…….Hehehe."

Kino Raichi stood up.

He picked up the sunglasses that fell when he rolled earlier and put them back on. It made his expression unreadable. Following that, he picked up the chain too and wrapped it back around the waist of his half pants.

"Honestly, I have no interest whatsoever in the end of the world. I don't want to see the end. I don't care about that. It doesn't matter. The world? Why don't you leave it to America's president?"

"……."

"I'm just interested in Mr. Fox."

Kino-san opened the door and went into the hallway before turning back to look towards me and *Ii-chan*.

"It's nothing. I don't know about the other *Thirteen Stairs*, but as for myself… It's just that I'm in love with Mr. Fox."

With just the corners of his mouth, he smiled widely.

"Then, **if we have a connection, let's meet again**, *Ii-chan* and… probably that kid too."

The door automatically slid closed,

and Kino-san's figure could no longer be seen.

Once again, Miiko-san and I were the only ones left in the hospital room, as if we were trapped.

"……..Fuu."

Miiko-san sighed, shrank the baton, and then, putting the baton in her mouth, she tore open the envelope she'd received from Kino-san without any hesitation.

"Wait, Miiko-san!"

"What?"

"Th-that's a letter to me, right?"

"I was the one to receive it."

"That's true, but....."

"I'm free to do what I want with my things."

"....."

"Hmm. Well, this too... is unwanted assistance."

While saying that, Miiko-san didn't do something as careless as throwing the torn letter in the trash. Instead, she opened the window and threw it outside. Recovery was now impossible by any stretch of the imagination.

.....No, well, even if I had received it, I'm sure I would've done the same thing as Miiko-san.

A letter from the fox-masked man.

And the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Kino-san.....

He said he wasn't a fighter.

Come to think of it, the *younger sister* of the *Niounomiya siblings*, Rizumu-chan, had no fighting ability at all, and yet she was an admirable member of the *Thirteen Stairs*. I see, I was too impressed by Izumu-kun. I thought that every other member would be like that, but that was definitely not the case.....

However.

That being said, Kino Raichi.

What was that guy.....

It's hard to say that he was fully capable of fulfilling his role as a messenger, and that feeling of being a small fry that he gave off was abnormal.

It was as though he was an underling.

Even if Miiko-san wasn't there, even if I were the only one to be his opponent, even though I was still currently hospitalized and my body was recovering, he was so much of an underling that I would've been able to evade him.

But.....

Even then.

Even with that.

That being said... Kino Raichi.

"He wasn't ordinary."

Miiko-san said.

Yeah, that's right.

That figure rolling pathetically around the hospital room, begging desperately for his life towards Miiko-san who was holding her sword at the ready, even then....

I couldn't bring myself to look down on him.

It wasn't because he was a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*. That had nothing to do with it.

At that last moment,

When I mentioned the fox-masked man.

For him to be able **to say those lines**....

That was proof that Kino-san wasn't someone ordinary.

I looked around at the damage in the hospital room.

If you excluded the mess that was caused by Kino-san flailing around, the only damage done amounted to just the locker that was torn apart by Miiko-san's baton.

If it'd ended with just that, then it would have been fine, but.....

Obviously, I didn't think it would end with just that.

The end of it all had only just begun.

".....Miiko-san."

"Yes?"

After having closed the window, Miiko-san turned around.

Our eyes met.

I was a bit at a loss for words at the blank expression on her face.

"Ah, umm... because we made a lot of noise... you should leave before a nurse or someone else comes. If we're not careful, you might end up banned from here."

"I see. That's true. As for the details, well, I'll just not ask. If I heard them, I might want to do something else. Then... our

conversation ended halfway through, but that's how it is. When you get discharged, I'll come back with Hou to help you."

"Thanks."

"Yeah," Miiko-san said, picking up her baggage. "Then."

"Um... Miiko-san."

"What?"

"No matter what, is it a no?"

Really... I was bad at giving up.

Even though it had already ended.

Even though Miiko-san had clearly stated the conclusion.

I was still, as always, afraid of the conclusion.

"....Hmm."

Miiko-san faintly smiled.

"If you, to the extent that I wouldn't have any room to meddle in, became a respectable guy, then certainly, it wouldn't be an impossible thing. Then we wouldn't both break each other and instead we could support each other. Instead of dragging each other down, we'd support each other."

"That's vague. Specifically, what do you mean by **respectable**?"

"Let me see. Specifically, huh....." Miiko-san took her eyes off of me and looked up at the ceiling. "For example, like the guy just now, I guess... if you could puff out your chest and proudly say that you love someone else...."

"....."

Instead of being liked by someone....

If I became able to say that I liked someone.

If I could love someone.

If I could do that earnestly, was that what it meant?

Liking someone.

In the end, it seemed like that was the flip side of being liked.

If you were liked by someone, then you'd grow to like that person as well.

If you were liked, then you'd become happy.

And because you were happy, you'd begin to like.

Then....

Was liking someone and being liked the same thing?

Then someone....

If I could say that I loved someone.

While puffing out my chest with pride.

If I could say those words.

I.....

What exactly would I become?

"Well then, rest well."

Saying that, Miiko-san showed her back to me.

The door opened and closed.

From one to two, then two to three, then losing one to two, gaining another to three, and then, after reducing again to two, in the end what was left... was one, huh?

Today was quite confusing.

And a lot of things had happened.

It seemed like three days had passed since Houko-chan wiped off my sweat... Ah, no, since Houko-chan came to visit me frequently, that might just have been my memory being confused.

Houko-chan.

Miiko-san.

Kino Raichi.

And... the fox-masked man, huh.

Today, even though it was sudden and unexpected, and even though it didn't turn out to be anything serious, getting Miiko-san involved should be seen as an opportunity.

The truth was, what I didn't like about what happened today, and what I didn't expect, was the fact that that man, Kino Raichi, called me Ii-chan.

Ii-chan.

It seemed like it was nothing, but it was an anomaly.

That's because, in my conversations with the fox-masked man last month, and even in front of Izumu-kun, Rizumu-

chan, Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, I was never called by that nickname nor did I ever call myself that.

There were only three people who had called me by that name before and after that. Three people.

My little sister who had died.

A close friend who was no longer here.

And....

Kunagisa Tomo.

The fox-masked man.....

Had found his way to Kunagisa Tomo.

"....."

Soon.....

Really, seriously.

The moment when I'd have to make a decision might come.

I couldn't just stay like this, regardless of how it might look.

I couldn't continue grumbling about trivial things, huh.....

"......Ii~. If you don't give me a good explanation, you won't make it out of this hospital alive."

I didn't know if she had come to tease me after a bit of a delay because Houko-chan and Miiko-san were here, or if she simply came after hearing the noise. Regardless, the one who entered the hospital room without even knocking was the nurse Katanashi Rabumi, who was pointing at the destroyed locker with a forced smile.

Her shadow took the form of a demon.

"......The piled up emotions of a young man hospitalized for a long time, as an example, can be taken out on this locker."

"Go die."

"Oh, um, Rabumi-san."

"What?"

"I love you."

"Then hand over your money."

Hmm.

I see.

This was pretty hard to do.

0

There will always be hell in your heart.

1

September 21st.

For the time being, I was discharged from the hospital and, the next day,

I ended up meeting someone nostalgic.

If possible, I would've liked to have seen her sooner, but I couldn't do that while I was in the hospital, and she had various things she needed to deal with (she's a very busy person), so it got pushed back to today.

The meeting time was at ten in the morning.

The meeting spot was the stairs at Kyoto Station.

Just saying stairs is a bit too vague, but Kyoto Station has a ridiculously long staircase that continues straight up to the rooftop. There's also a stage at the bottom of the staircase, so the stairs also serve as seats for the audience. It's official name is, quite literally, the *Grand Stairway*, but the meaning is not well understood with just that, so the people around me started to call it the *Thousand Mile Staircase*.

The thirteenth step from the bottom.

Of course, it was me who chose that spot for our reunion.

"…..You seem to be in a good mood, Onii-chan."

"Huh?"

"You seem to be in high spirits."

After finishing my early morning training with Miiko-san that I'd started as soon as I got out of the hospital, I went to a nearby public bath (open 24 hours a day) where I washed off my sweat and changed clothes. It was currently 9:00 a.m. If I took

the bus, it would take about thirty minutes to get from Nakadachiuri to Kyoto Station. I felt it was a bit too early, but there was no problem in being too early. As I left the apartment, I met Houko-chan who was wearing a straw hat.

But, in high spirits.....

"......Well, first of all, hello, Houko-chan."

"First of all, good morning, Onii-chan."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm killing bugs."

"....."

You know.....

There are other ways to say it, like pest control.

"Onii-chan, are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah, an appointment."

"A date."

"It's not like that."

"But you're in high spirits."

"I'm not."

"Hiyah."

I received a low kick.

She hit my ankle splendidly and did a lot of damage.

".....What are you doing, Houko-chan?"

"With Onii-chan being in high spirits, I felt an intolerable strain on a fundamental part of my spirit, so I judged it to be an emergency situation and promptly dealt with it."

"That's the kind of explanation that doesn't need to be made....."

"You should get going," Houko-chan said, twisting her red lips ever so slightly. "Because we both have two legs and my stress hasn't yet fully dissipated."

"....."

Following Houko-chan's advice, I quickly left the front of the apartment and headed for the nearby bus stop.

I wonder.....

Setting aside whether I was in a good mood, Houko-chan

seemed to be in a bad mood. Yesterday when we went to eat at Shinkyogoku, she seemed to have a lot of fun... I wonder, did she have a fight with Moeta-kun?

Anyways, girls her age made no sense to me.

That was also what I thought back when I was working part-time as a tutor.

Hime-chan was also quite hard to understand, but in a sense, maybe that wasn't actually something unique to her.

Well, there were still quite a few people who had reached the end of their years and still didn't make any sense.....

Age.

Time.

Stagnation.

Stoppage.

Acceleration, huh.....

"It's really nonsense....."

After a few minutes of waiting, I got on a bus to Kyoto Station. Since it was a weekday morning, the bus was full of empty seats. Without any particular reason, I sat in the front most seat.

The bus's engine.

A heavy bass sound.

As usual, the roads in Kyoto were full of traffic lights, so even though it wasn't particularly congested, the bus advanced slowly--- (In cities, generally, bikes are a better means of transportation than cars)--- with that, I reached my destination at the expected time.

9 and a half.

Since I hadn't eaten breakfast, I figured I'd get something in my stomach before climbing the *Thousand Mile Staircase*, but after thinking about it for a moment, I decided that I didn't want to be late, even if it was only by a few minutes, so I decided to put up with my hunger for a bit longer.

Well then.....

I thought.

The problem, the most important problem here.

Was who exactly was coming.

That I didn't hear.

Although the time and place of the meeting was clear, when it came to **the person** I was waiting for, it was honestly uncertain.

Of course, I didn't care who it was. My big heart was ready to accept anyone with generosity, but.....

It's not like I didn't have hope.

If possible, I'd prefer it to be her.

Well, she was fine too.

But she was also hard to get rid of.....

"....."

No, I guess anyone was fine.

After putting an end to my meaningless train of thought, I entered Kyoto Station, took two escalators, and headed for the stairs.

At that point, it was forty past nine.

The person I was meeting was already there.

A camisole, a mini skirt and white loafers.

Holding a somewhat large suitcase with both hands.

Since it was a staircase that doubled as a place to sit on, it would've been fine for her to sit down and wait, but in that mini skirt, there'd certainly be some reluctance. She stood on the thirteenth step from the bottom, one step above the first landing so as not to get in the way of others, with proper manners and good posture.

Her hairstyle was a bit different.

Maybe it was just for summer.

".....Hmm."

Since she wasn't wearing glasses, it wasn't her.

As for the two remaining possibilities, I wouldn't know until I talked to her. It was like a cat-killing doppelganger, I thought. When it came down to it, though, I felt like making it clear would be a waste... I'd like to enjoy this uncertain situation

where both possibilities still existed a bit more.

And, while I was still hesitating to call out to her,

"Ah."

The other side noticed me.

"What, so you were already here. You should've called out to me sooner. You're mischievous." She came down the stairs and, after straightening up in front of me, bowed deeply. "It has been a while, but I'm glad to see that you're doing well."

"…….Thank you."

And, well, that's just the way it was.

The person waiting was Chiga Hikari-san.

Chiga Hikari….

She was one of the maids serving the master of Wet Crow's Feather Island, Akagami Iria. Besides her there were three more maids, the head maid, Handa Rei, (in other words, Hikari-san's boss), and Hikari-san's identical sisters, Chiga Akari and Chiga Teruko, who serve Akagami Iria.

April.

About half a year ago, I visited that island alongside Kunagisa Tomo and got involved in an absurd murder case. It wasn't as if Kunagisa or I were in any direct danger, but… the incident on that island, at least as far as I was concerned, happened during the period when I left the ER program and came back to Japan. It was now etched into my memory.

Memorable.

Anyway, it was memorable.

Still, I hadn't yet sorted it out.

Probably because it was a difficult case to understand.

It had no connection to something as understandable as a demonic killer or a professional killer, but, even then, it's not like it was something as incomprehensible as a middle school girl.

Not easy to understand.

It's not like I didn't know.

The part that was hard to understand.

In the end, the problem was the culprit, that person.

She.

She who had no name.

She who was without a name.

A nobody, someone who didn't even have a name.

Her way of thinking was the biggest problem.

But, well, I guess you could say that it was because of that incident that Kunagisa and I were able to meet with Aikawa Jun. Hence why I don't regret going to that island.

Not really.

But.

Even then....

Let's return to the main subject.

Anyway, at the very least I was sure that Rei-san wouldn't come, so I thought that the one I'd see today would either be Hikari-san, Akari-san, or Teruko-san. I had assumed that it would be Hikari-san, and that prediction was spot on.

"....."

But anyone could have predicted it.

Akari-san hated me as if I were a snake and Teruko-san had abandoned all communication with others.

"This is the first time I've seen you in plain clothes, Hikari-san."

"What? Ah, yes." Hikari-san nodded. "As one would expect, that maid getup would stand out in the city. When we leave the island, we wear plain clothes."

"Hmm. I see."

"Ah! But it's bad, isn't it?"

"Huh? What is?"

"No, according to what I heard from Tomo-san....." Hikari-san's cheeks turned slightly red and she said with great reluctance, "If I remember correctly, you like maid outfits....."

"That's a misunderstanding."

"So it was a misunderstanding?"

"Maybe there are some people like that in this world, but

I'm not like that, so you don't need to worry."

I swear, Kunagisa says some outrageous things. It's not that I like maid outfits, I just respect the existence of maids. The clothing is, in the end, nothing more than a trifling matter, and a matter of attitude.

.....

No, that’s just nonsense, isn’t it?

"So, what will we do now? Hikari-san."

"Ah, yes. For now, let's go to a place where we can talk calmly. In this crowded place, even greetings are difficult."

"Talk calmly, is it... then where would you like to go? It's a bit early for lunch, but maybe we should go to a coffee shop for some light tea....."

"Ah, no." Hikari-san turned to my left. "The place has already been prepared by us."

"Ah, you are well prepared. As expected, I should say....." I nodded. "Then, where should we go now?"

"A hotel."

"What?"

"We have reserved a room at a hotel."

It was a normal hotel, of course.

The large international hotel in Karasuma Takatsuji. According to Hikari-san, this hotel was affiliated with the Akagami Conglomerate. It was the perfect environment to have a private conversation that you didn't want others to hear with someone.

That being said, Iria-san was already disconnected from the Akagami family, so we couldn't stand out too much. Hikari-san was also acting undercover this time, so we couldn't take the top-floor suite. Instead, we got a room with a double bed for normal customers.

I ordered a suitable meal from room service and as I was locking the door whilst waiting for it to arrive, Hikari-san sat down in a chair. Across the table from her, I took a seat on the bed which took up most of the room's space.

"Hmm... as I thought, the sun is strong on the mainland."

"Is that so?"

"Even though it's only been a few hours, my skin already hurts."

"Should we buy a jacket somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'm no longer at the age where exposing my skin is a service."

I had strong arguments against those words, but I didn't meet with Hikari-san today to talk about that.

And, as Houko-chan had said, this was definitely not a date, unfortunately.

I had something to do.

I came because I had something to do.

And that too, with each other.

"Well, let's start with you, Hikari-san."

"Ah, yes. That's right."

Hikari-san corrected her posture.

"Umm... I've got a lot to report, but, well, first of all, it's already become a formality, but I have a message from Ojou-sama."

"Won't I come again with Kunagisa to the island, is it?"

"That's it."

"I don't want to."

"Yes....." Hikari-san had a bitter smile. "I thought you were probably going to say that. It's just a formality."

"A formality, yes. Well, setting me aside... It's a bit rude to say it like this, but Kunagisa has already lost all interest in that island. Just taking that shut-in out of her house is already a big task. Unless there's something really important, she won't move."

"Something important, is it?"

I'm in trouble, Hikari-san said as she tilted her head.

Cute.

"I think that Ojou-sama would be very delighted even if you came alone."

"Hmm....."

No, well.

I don't think it was a bad offer.

It's the perfect place to retire to.

The food is delicious and the rooms are clean.

And the maids.

I thought as I looked at Hikari-san.

"Still, it's a no."

"So it's no good."

As expected of a professional, even if it was just self concealment, she didn't show any signs of disappointment since it was just a *formality*.

"To tell you the truth, I wondered whether I should say this or not, but....." Hikari-san suddenly changed the subject. "But I'll report it to you just in case."

"Report? 'Just in case' is a strange phrase to use."

"Ojou-sama has entrusted me with the decision."

"Oh... that person did, huh. If that's the case, then certainly you can only say that it's *just in case*. There's no other way to express it. So what is it? Does that have something to do with what you just said?"

"Yes."

Hikari-san nodded with a strange expression on her face.

"Do you remember Himena Maki-san?"

"Forgetting her is impossible."

"She's been killed."

"....."

For a moment, I couldn't get any words out.

My lips stopped as I was trying to say something.

"As I thought, you didn't know. I thought that Tomo-san might have investigated it a bit, but...."

"......That's a joke, right?"

Himena Maki....

That person was killed?

Himena Maki.

An unprecedented fortune teller.

The past, present, and future were all in the palm of her hand.

There's nothing unknown to her.

There's no object that she can't see.

There's no sound that she can't hear.

On Wet Crow's Feather Island, the person who had further complicated the already complicated case, the one who saw the whole truth and just drowned herself in alcohol with a smirk on her face.....

Her dying is ridiculous.

It's just too ridiculous.

Even if it's a joke, I can't laugh.

If it's reality, then even more so.

"It was quite a while ago...." As if not caring about my disturbance, Hikari-san began to explain calmly. "About one month ago, that's when it took place."

"While I was still hospitalized... I see."

"Yes. It was a locked room case."

"Again?"

"Yes. How many times has it been... I don't want to count anymore."

"……..Um, the cook... is she fine?" Last time she really lost her composure. I thought it finally ended, but for it to happen again... I don't think she has nerves strong enough for that. "The cause of death?"

"Beaten to death, it seems." Hikari-san said. "Specifically a cerebral contusion and blood loss. The corpse, it was really awful... to the point that I don't even want to remember it."

"Her insides were emptied and her brains were scattered around, right?"

"…….You're well informed."

"I heard it all. From the person in question."

When we were leaving, she told me.

From her own mouth, the details of her own death.

As if she understood everything, along with a smile.

As if she gave up everything, along with a smile.

But the question remains.

At that time, I think she said that her *death* would come two years from now. Two years from now, on March 21st, at 3:23 p.m. That's what she said.

It's not even close.

That she was killed…….

No matter what, it's too abrupt.

"If I told her that, Kunagisa might start to say that she wants to go to that island again. Though, that's only if she doesn't already know." I said. "After all it's about Himena-san... and it's a locked room case."

"I think that too. But in this case, the one Ojou-sama wants to invite is rather Aikawa-san, so….."

"……Aikawa-san, huh... there's that problem too."

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

Red hair and a stylish suit.

A cynical and violent way of speaking, sanpaku eyes.

Ever since I got involved with the case on Wet Crow's Feather Island, I've had a good relationship with her, and been indebted to her, and caused a lot for her, but.....

Presently, her location was unknown.

No information had come to light on that person.

".....Right now, the Akagami Conglomerate is using every resource to track her down. But to tell you the truth, we haven't found any sign of her at this point."

"It seems like you're worried."

"Yes. Needless to say, Ojou-sama is heartbroken and I am too, though not as much. I just can't keep my calm. In fact, there seems to be some theories that she died mixed in with the investigation... In most cases, there's no need for someone like me to worry about Aikawa-san, but this time things are a little different....."

"....."

I had heard about Aikawa Jun's disappearance during my stay at the hospital.

On Sunday, August 20th, at the main hall of Kiyomizu Temple before dawn, the last footprints of Aikawa Jun were left. I say footprints, but rather, what was left there was the complete destruction of the place. Even now, one month later, it had still not yet been fully restored and remained closed to visitors.

The two who should have fought there.

Aikawa Jun and Niounomiya Izumu have both disappeared.

"*Killing Names,* was it.....?" Hikari-san mumbled. "I've served the Akagami family since before I can remember, so I've heard rumors about them... But I've always thought of them as a fairy tale."

".....I actually saw two... no, *three*. More than just seeing them, I met them. That's why, rather than a fairy tale, I'd say

it’s more of a dream."

A dream that’s definitely a nightmare.

Niounomiya Izumu, Niounomiya Rizumu, and one more.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

He’s currently missing too, and the chances of him being dead are strong.

But that being said.

Izumu-kun, Zerozaki, and of course, Aikawa-san too.

"They’re not the kind of people who’d die even if they were killed... It's only a loss for us to worry about them. That may sound like I’m just trying to cheer you up or make you feel better, but that's more than half of my true feelings."

"Abnormal inhumans, is it?"

"That's right," I said, nodding to Hikari-san, who seemed unconvinced. "Well, to be honest though, the fact that Aikawa-san is missing at this point in time is a big problem for me. There was something I wanted to discuss with her, or rather, there was something I needed to discuss with her."

"Something you needed to discuss?"

"Yeah. Or rather, something I need to tell her, I guess... well, that's why I’ve taken the minimum steps to contact her, but....."

"Yeah....."

"By the way, um, about the case where Maki-san was killed... I think you also learned about Aikawa-san's disappearance there, but... in the end, what happened? Were you able to find the culprit without Aikawa-san?"

"No... that's... you see..." Hikari-san hesitated to say. "Unlike that time in April, it seems the perpetrator came from the outside."

"An outside perpetrator?"

"That’s the conclusion reached based on the eyewitness testimony, items left at the scene, and the investigation of alibis. You see... we’re also pretty experienced."

".....Right."

Even before that case in April, a lot happened.

Experienced.

It sounds bad, but it's true.

"But what about the possibility that it was all a cover?"

"It's not like there is none... but, in the first place, when the case happened there was almost no one on the island. Apart from the maids and Ojou-sama, there were only two other guests besides Himena-san."

"Two....."

One of them is probably that cook.

It's unlikely that she's the culprit, so the only one to suspect would be that other *guest*. If you could prove that person's innocence, you'd have to conclude that the crime was committed by an outsider.

Hmm.....

As I thought, it's a little too dumbfounding.

Too sudden, you could say.

The feeling that I can't accept the fact that that bratty, evil fortune teller is dead was certainly still inside me.

Hmm.

A locked room murder, huh.....

"The story... well, please tell me the details later. Depending on the case, Kunagisa and I might visit that island one more time."

"Ojou-sama wishes for that."

"It's ultimately up to Kunagisa to decide, though," I said before taking a breath. "Then, next would be my request. Is that fine with you, Hikari-san?"

"Yes."

Hikari-san said that and waited for my next words.

She looked prepared to deal with any situation.

Well, that's to be expected.

In the first place, I was the one who requested this meeting. I'm sure Hikar-san had some business to attend to, like various formalities, but the conversation we've had up until now was

about things that could've been discussed over the phone.

However, my business wasn't something that could be done over the phone.

It's something that can only be discussed in a hotel like this.

"I'm currently investigating a man."

"……A man……..?"

"His name is Saitou Takashi. He said he's Aikawa Jun's father."

"……."

It seemed I touched on a sore spot….

Hikari-san had that kind of expression on her face.

I can't turn back now, though.

"While I was in the hospital, I began to look into it, but honestly, there's a limit to what I can find out on my own. His family structure, his history… no matter what, I end up getting stuck on those points. And those records… they completely stopped about ten years ago. The last ten years are completely unknown to me."

That's because Saitou Takashi is dead.

But…

There's no way that's the case.

If Saitou Takashi were dead….

Last month's case wouldn't have happened.

Hime-chan wouldn't have died.

"But Hikari-san. The history of Saitou Takashi that I've learned up to this point… there's no way it hadn't caught your master, Iria-san's, attention. Moreover, Iria-san has a connection with Aikawa-san. There's a *connection*. If you know something, please, would you tell me?"

"…….So that was it."

Hikari-san sighed melancholically.

"…..If you want to investigate something, wouldn't asking Tomo-san be a better choice? Tomo-san, and also her friend that I heard about. I'm sure they would be able to immediately find something of this level."

"I've thought about it."

When Kino-san attacked us....

I couldn't say anything carelessly.

Even if it was to stave off boredom or kill time, I couldn't say anything.

This time, I managed to get through it with just getting myself nearly strangled by Rabumi-san, but that doesn't mean next time will go so peacefully.

That fox-masked man....

If he really sees me as an enemy, I need to be prepared to deal with him too.

I've reached the limit of what I could do on my own.

"However, I can't involve Kunagisa in this, I just can't do it. I can't do it, or at the very least I don't want to. Honestly, this time the situation is so bad that I seriously can't joke about it."

"Hmm." Hikari-san looked suspicious. "I don't know... I suppose that's part of it, but it doesn't seem like that's the only thing."

"....."

She really has good instincts.

As a servant on that island, she's seen many inhuman abilities, so she must have experience.

"Well... the truth is, Kunagisa is also in a bit of a mess at the moment. It's a problem within the Kunagisa Syndicate, the Kunagisa House, so it's not directly related to Kunagisa, but her brother is a little... y'know."

"Is it the kind of topic I shouldn't hear about in detail?"

"Probably."

"Then please say no more."

"Yeah... I think that's a wise decision. Well, I'm told that the trouble is about to come to an end, though...."

It seems like it's some sort of rebellion within the organization, so it's a story very far removed from Kunagisa or me, but for Nao-san, Kunagisa's blood related brother, Kunagisa Tomo is something like an Achilles' heel, so I'm in a

situation where I can't contact her carelessly.

As I recall, the rebellion happened at around the time when I was just hospitalized. Hmm... so in other words, it happened at around the time when Aikawa-san disappeared. Huh? Come to think of it, wasn't Maki-san also killed about a month ago?

.....What is this? This coincidence.

It's bizarre.

No, it's not really that odd. It's just that things overlapped to this extent.

It's just a coincidence.

Of course it is.

"But it's true that I don't want to involve her. That's more important to me. Well, to tell you the truth, I was also a bit reluctant to ask Hikari-san and the others. It's just, with Kunagisa and Aikawa unavailable, there's no one else to turn to."

".....Hmmm."

Hikari-san folded her arms with a difficult look on her face.

She closed her eyes and wrinkled her brows.

When she makes a face like that, it reminds me of Akari-san and makes it a bit hard for me to call out to her.

".....I guess I'm just relying too much on others, aren't I?"

"No, I think that's a good habit," Hikari-san said. "Since you arrived on the island in April, I've noticed that you have a tendency to try to settle everything by yourself. It's a good thing to rely on others."

"I'm not very good at it. Being helped by other people."

Miiko-san who fought off Kino-san.

I had some remorse, and I really think I'm sorry, but even then, I wasn't really thankful.

To be honest, it's like I wasn't thankful at all.

Far from that, I'm even somewhat mad.

Why didn't she escape?

Why didn't she let me handle it?

Miiko-san.....

I want to blame her for her weakness.

She who can't help but help others.

That's probably different from kindness.

As she herself said, it's probably something more.

As I've always thought, Miiko-san's personality has roughly nothing to do with kindness. It was, in essence, an unshakeable and profound strictness which, as if contradicting itself, inevitably contained her sweetness within.

There is a difference between kindness and sweetness.

Our compatibility is good.....

That's certainly true. There's not many people in this world that are worth spoiling as much as me. But that's why the chemistry between us is the worst.

Well.....

Being able to strictly control herself without being swept away by the flow is the impressive thing about Miiko-san.

It's something impossible for me.

As Hikari-san says, I have a tendency to try to bear everything by myself, but that's just me controlling myself to the best of my ability. In reality, I'm someone who easily asks others for help.

That is the truth.

"It doesn't seem like it."

Hikari-san untied her arms and placed them on her knees.

"Setting that aside, even then... that question is pretty critical for you and me. You understand, right?"

"In my own way."

".....In your own way, then it's troubling....." Hikari-san had a really troubled look on her face. "In the first place, all I can tell you are trivial things. To the point that it may be better not to hear it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's more of a story of Aikawa Jun than a story of Saitou Takashi," Hikari-san said. "I guess it's a question of Aikawa-san's privacy."

"Yes... if it were possible, I would've liked to talk to Aikawa-san directly, too."

Now I regret that when I met with Aikawa-san before she and Izumu-kun had her match, I didn't tell her that I had met Saitou Takashi.

"What I want to know now, rather than what happened in the last ten years, is what happened during his two trips to America. When Saitou Takashi was involved with the ER3 and the ER2 system, what exactly did he do? In particular, if he really is Aikawa-san's father, then considering his age, what should be focused on is what he did the first time he went there...."

"Umm... about Saitou Takashi, I've never met him and I only met Aikawa-san a few years ago. That applies not just for me, but also for Ojou-sama too. The salon project was just in its infancy at that time, so please don't think that what I'm about to say is the absolute truth. It's just something that Oujo-sama and we researched out of curiosity. It's not something that we heard directly from Aikawa-san, and again, it's not like we confirmed it's veracity. It's nothing more than nonsensical and groundless rumors. It's just gossip. I hope you understand that."

"......Will you tell me?"

"I'm not really enthusiastic about it, but it probably can't be helped. Likely, this is...."

".....not unrelated to the fact that Himena-san was killed."

Badump.

My heart shook.

Those casual words shook me.

I wonder... what does it mean?

I didn't understand.

I didn't understand at all.

However, this isn't the kind of atmosphere that allows questions.

I could only be silent and wait for Hikari-san's words.

"Aikawa Jun, Humanity's Strongest Contractor."

Hikari-san began to speak in an unexpectedly fluent tone of voice. I swallowed and listened to her with bated breath.

"There exist three people that she calls father."

"Th-three?"

"Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya, and Saitou Takashi."

"....."

These names... I know them.

Kajou Akira.

Aikawa Junya.

The people who went to America with Saitou Takashi the second time.

The colleagues who later went on to found MS-2.

But the information about those two was exceedingly low. So low that it's abysmal. I couldn't find anything about them.

Speaking of which, the second man, Aikawa Junya.

His last name reads the same as Aikawa's. (TL : Junya's Aikawa 藍川 and Jun's Aikawa 哀川)

"Yes," Hikari-san nodded. "Aikawa-san's current name is probably something she inherited from that man."

"But three parents, I don't really get it... Do you mean fathers who raised her?"

"Yes, it seems Aikawa-san was raised by those three people. But of course, at that time she wasn't named *Aikawa Jun*."

"At that time... what do you mean?"

"Aikawa-san started to call herself *Aikawa Jun* after she started working as a contractor. About ten years ago."

"Ten years....."

I didn't know that she had been doing that for ten years. Speaking of ten years ago, I was about 9 and a half. I hadn't met Kunagisa, Nao-san, or Kasumioka-san, and on top of that... I

didn’t even know about the existence of my little sister yet.

Memories of my childhood that I didn’t even want to remember.

No, I don't mind the memories.

That's right, speaking of ten years ago....

"That's right, ten years ago. Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya, and Saitou Takashi... they all passed away," Hikari-san said while looking down. "Official records state that all of them, including the daughter of those three, are dead and the culprit is unknown.... but, according to a reliable source, the one who killed those three was the daughter. In other words, that's Aikawa-san."

".....I didn’t know that."

Patricide.

At that time Aikawa-san was in her mid-teens.

"Certainly, Aikawa-san must have been alive and not dead at that time. Then the possibility of that is high. So the sole survivor was the culprit.....?"

"It’s just... there’s no way to verify if the daughter those three raised is the *Aikawa Jun* we know."

"What do you mean 'no way'?"

"I mean, there was no one there to witness it. If there was a person who knew the truth, then that could only be Aikawa-san."

After saying that, Hikari-san closed her mouth for a bit.

It seems she was examining my reaction.

I didn't falter.

"What about her real father? Is he among those three? Ah, no, that way of saying it might be weird in this case. I mean her *biological father*. Is it Saitou Takashi? Or is it that guy, Aikawa Junya?"

"That’s unknown."

"Unknown....."

"Only, I don’t think she’s the biological child of Saitou Takashi. Because when he came back to Japan for the first time,

he was appointed as a professor at Takatsu University. I presume you already know that much, right?"

"Yes. If it's only that much."

"……At that time, when he was living in the clinic, no one confirmed the existence of his daughter. There wasn't even a rumor. Since it was the return of the prodigy from the ER2 System, the media were all over him, so if he had a kid, I don't think he could've hid it."

"But that's in the case that they lived together, right?"

It's possible that during his first trip to the U.S., he had a child and left it there when he returned home. I was surprised to see that the two names that came up during my investigation, Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya, were Aikawa-san's fathers along with Saitou Takashi, but even then, I can't imagine that there's no blood relation between Aikawa-san and Saitou Takashi, that fox-masked man.

Because.

Their faces.

They looked very similar....

"……. Is there something?"

"Ah, no." I tried to keep up appearances in a rush. "It's nothing. Please continue."

I couldn't say something like that.

That I had already met Saitou Takashi.

If I said that, Hikari-san might get involved in the situation. I had no choice but to just listen to her story, but in reality, I was extremely worried. Right now, at this moment, even from this hotel's window, I'm worried that a new assassin from the man with the fox mask might jump in.

Even if this hotel is protected by the Akagami Conglomerate, that fox-masked man... he was able to break through the Kunagisa Syndicate's guard with ease and at a pace so leisurely that they didn't even notice whether he was there or not.

No matter the guard you put up, it's not a matter of "if I do

this much it should be fine," it's more like "if I do this much and it fails, then it couldn't be helped." It's only a way of making yourself feel better.

That's what that fox-masked man is.

"As for the mother, that too is unknown."

"But it's not like there isn't one. It's from over twenty years ago, so there's no way it's a test tube baby."

"Well, both her real father and her real mother exist, or at least they did. But in regards to Saitou Takashi, Kajou Akira, and Aikawa Junya, because of the reasons I stated earlier, we presume that they aren't Aikawa-san's real father."

"So what does it mean?"

"We think that she may have been an orphan in the first place. That's not something particularly rare in America. Maybe they raised a kid that they picked up from somewhere."

"……What's your basis?"

"No one knew about that kid during the *period when she was even younger*. Kids don't just suddenly grow, right? There's a process to their growth. That's what it is."

"……"

Her infancy didn't exist, is that it?

I see, that makes sense.

But…

I can't be satisfied with just that.

I have a reason to not be satisfied.

"……"

But setting that aside.

When it comes to this, there's a theory that we absolutely need to confirm. A theory whose authenticity I need to confirm. It's a frightening guess, it's a guess born from an unimaginable delusion. but if the fact is that Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya, and Saitou Takashi were all the fathers of Aikawa Jun….

Then I have to be sure.

"Hikari-san. Well, the *Four Gods and One Mirror* to which Iria-san's Akagami family belongs to have a strong link to the

ER3 System, so maybe you already know, but in that system, the MS-2 division did some pretty insane stuff. A *close friend* of mine was involved in it, so I know very well....."

"....Yes."

"I was surprised when I investigated it. MS-2 is the division that Saitou Takashi built himself. At first,I thought it was that. You know, when you learn a new word, the frequency at which you see that word in books or in the newspaper explodes. I thought it was something like that kind of phenomenon. Words that you know are easier to spot, so even though the probability of them appearing doesn't change, we end up thinking that it's an amazing coincidence. I thought it was that kind of illusion, but...."

"....."

"When it comes to this, it's a different story. This isn't a coincidence. I don't like this word, but there's a ***connection***! There's no other way to put it. It's too good to be a coincidence. Please tell me, Hikari-san. Just one more thing. Was Aikawa-san involved with that division, the MS-2 in any way. No, **was she involved?**"

"....**It's likely.**"

Hikari-san answered.

It was something awfully comical.

It made me feel like laughing at a high pitch.

What is this?

How convenient.

Absurdly inconvenient.

Are you saying that everything... it was all predetermined?

Are you saying it's a fixed Story?

It makes me want to laugh.

It makes me want to laugh.

It makes me want to laugh.

It makes me want to laugh so much my guts are boiling.

In April, when I met Aikawa-san.

In May, when I met Zerozaki.

In June, when I met Hime-chan.

In July, when I met Utsurigi-san.

And in August....

Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan.

Encountering the fox-masked.

Are you saying it was all predetermined?

No, that's not it.

Even earlier.

Much much earlier.

Meeting my sister.

And my sister's death.

Meeting Kunagisa.

And breaking Kunagisa.

And....

"……!!"

Meeting him and parting ways.

It's idiotic.

Everything is fixed.

Everything is stagnating.

Everything is breaking apart.

Like an anchor, a chain of the law.

Do you want to say it was all connected?

You're going to tell me that all of this until now was just foreshadowing, something that absurd.....

"Um...."

"……"

"A-are you fine? You look a bit pale...."

Fine?

Fine, you say?

If you're asking me if I'm fine, then of course I'm fine.

I was prepared for this.

I was prepared to face this kind of pain if I delved any deeper into the fox-masked man's past. When I saw the name of the ER3 System, and moreover, when I saw the name of MS-2, I had prepared myself.

But this is too awful.

I even feel malice.

I can't look, it's a farce.

I feel sick, I think I'm going to throw up.

This....

I couldn't make Kunagisa research this.

It seems like that was a blessing in disguise.

Well, I half-expected this outcome, as if it was obvious. I didn't want to get Kunagisa involved, and of course the infighting within the Kunagisa Syndicate was an important reason for that, but ultimately, I didn't want her to see this result, this conclusion.

I didn't want to see the current look on my face.

".....What nonsense....."

But like that, I finally understood.

I see... if it's like that,

then certainly, I am your enemy.

Saitou Takashi.

There was no mistake in your eyes.

Like always, like in all of my 19 years, I thought I was just going to get caught up in the middle, but just this once, that's not the case.

That's not the case here.

It's not just a problem of having a weird person set their eyes on me.

If you are Aikawa-san's father, and Aikawa-san is connected to MS-2, then it is a natural consequence that I, this user of nonsense, would be against you.

This is truly...

Retribution.

A bad cause, a bad effect, and reaping what you've sown.

"Hikari-san....."

"....What is it?"

I could feel something akin to fear towards me in Hikari-san's reaction. It's not like I didn't understand. I probably had

that kind of look on my face.

"How interested are you... in the end of the world?"

".....I don't really get what you mean."

"Supposedly, this world has already existed for a mind-bogglingly large amount of time. If in this world that we're currently living in there was a time for it to end, if there was a final moment, would you like to see it, Hikari-san?"

"The world for me is just-"

Unexpectedly, Hikari-san answered immediately.

Without any pause.

Without taking a moment to think.

As if it were obvious, she answered, clearly and proudly.

"Just the Wet Crow's Feather Island. Akagami Iria-ojou-sama is, for me, the whole world. I just serve Ojou-sama. Therefore, the end of the world is, in other words, the end of Ojou-sama. For a servant to want to see their master through to the end is natural."

"....."

I see... it's a splendid answer.

And it's most likely correct.

It's fine.

No doubt about it.

There's nothing wrong with it anywhere.

"Hikari-san."

"What is it?"

"I love you."

Hikari-san smiled.

"Thank you very much."

That too was a flawless answer.

0

At the point where someone becomes a sacrifice, there's no happiness.

1

Now I can honestly admit that the Kunagisa Syndicate had set their eyes and called out to me, who was at the time nothing more than a middle schooler in the countryside who was just exceedingly and naturally going along with the flow.

The Kunagisa Syndicate.

Boasting the names of Ichigai, Nishiori, Sanzaka, Shikabane, Gotoride, Rokukase, the seventh name skipped over, and lastly Hachikiri, it oversees the monstrous community of these organizations set up all over Western Japan. Saying that it governs a quarter of the world wouldn't be that far fetched. It's the kind of organization that had created such a reality a long time ago.

It's headquarters are in the southeastern part of Hyogo Prefecture, in the cities of Kobe, Nishinomiya, and Ashiya.

I used to live in a hot spring resort town in Kobe, so you could say that I was born and raised mostly under the control of the Kunagisa Syndicate. The only way to describe it is that everything was set up by the Kunagisa Syndicate. But in most cases, when it comes to organizations that are too large, they become something like a religion or the state, an existence that you aren't particularly conscious of. That was the case for me back when I was a child.

However, that wasn't the case on the Kunagisa Syndicate's side.

At the very least, they weren't unaware.

They were aware.

They were overwhelmingly aware.

Aware that they were the rulers.

And they were prepared.

Overwhelmingly prepared.

At that point, I wonder...

What about me?

When I was 13 years old at that time, did I know myself?

No, not just myself.

Was there even one thing I knew?

Was there even one thing that I really, truly, knew with certainty?

Did I know?

The answer is, of course, *I didn't know*.

However, I did feel unsatisfied.

I felt doubt.

Even If I wasn't aware of the answer, I was aware of the question.

Because at that point, my little sister was dead.

Why is that.....?

I wonder why.

Why do people die so easily around me? Why is it that accidents happen so easily around me? Why does everyone around me only fight each other?

Why compete?

Why hate?

Why waver?

Why sorrow?

Why doubt?

Why loathe?

Why curse?

And why kill?

Everyone is crazy.

I thought that while pretending to be innocent myself.

I was an unpleasant child.

I looked down on my surroundings and felt good about it.

Pretending to be a bystander like a loser.

Thinking that I knew everything when I was more ignorant than anyone else.

That was me at 13.

That being said, I think I was more diligent back then, when I hadn't yet learned how to use nonsense, compared to the current me.

Because I was diligent,

I ended up being noticed by the Kunagisa Syndicate.

Again, that wasn't a coincidence, of course.

If anything, it was...

Only natural.

Naturally, the Kunagisa Syndicate called out to me, and I...

Like a miracle, I met Kunagisa Tomo.

"....."

Human happiness.

The condition of happiness.

Perhaps there exist some people who have never thought deeply about those concepts, but as long as they live in this world, it's impossible to avoid it entirely. It would be unbelievably difficult. Saying that no one wants to be unhappy might not be exact. Rather, if we take happiness as a simple antonym for *unhappiness*, then we can define it as *wanting to be less unhappy.*

Because they don't want to be unhappy, they make an effort.

Because they don't want to be unhappy, they don't make an effort.

If you think about it like that, it becomes easier to understand.

People are just too, too normal to want to live. Too obvious.

Therefore, instead of wishing for life, they think about avoiding death and arrive at the foolish misunderstanding that that is life.

Arrive.

Fall.

If that's a misunderstanding, though, then it's really comical.

There is comfort in the status quo because it doesn't make you more unhappy. Leaving possibilities and options to the last minute, without achieving results, is also less unhappy.

However, this argument is not enough for the world.

You can't reach the world with this argument.

Because as I've always thought, happiness and unhappiness, like hope and despair or love and hate aren't simple, unremarkable antonyms that can be described as a simple, unremarkable dualism.

Happiness and *unhappiness*, *fortune* and *misfortune*. In other words, it's a mysterious state of contradictions and paradoxes harmoniously blended together.

A vague, pre-defined state like that certainly exists.

For example,

yes, this current me.

Borrowing the Fiat from Miiko-san, I was currently heading to Shirosaki, the highest class residential area in Kyoto, where Kunagisa lives as a shut in. That's the current situation.

I think that going to see Kunagisa is happiness. Well, for the time being, it wasn't a hindrance.

But for example,

if Houko-chan was sitting in the back seat,

and if Hikari-san was in the driver's seat,

Then I wouldn't understand anything.

"....."

Why are they here?

Why are they still here?

"Hmm? Is something the matter?"

Hikari-san looked away from the windshield for a moment and smiled at me. I said, "no, it's nothing," and looked at the back seat in order to escape Hikari-san's gaze. There, Houko-chan was sleeping like an angel. Houko-chan has a habit of falling asleep when riding in a vehicle. It's the same whether she's riding in a car or a train. I think it's bad for a pretty girl like Houko-chan to carelessly fall asleep in a train, but since it's a habit, it probably won't be fixed. Even though we're not that far from Shirosaki, if she falls asleep now, I don't think she'll be able to wake up in time.

Rather, the problem was Hikari-san.

Why is she here?

Why is she driving the Fiat?

Why am I in the passenger seat?

And why is she in a maid outfit?

"....."

I knew it was weird to begin with. I had a feeling that her luggage was too big for a day trip. I didn't expect that she had the complete set in that trunk, though.

What I heard was that Iria-san was at the limit of her patience.

Apparently she ran out of patience for me, who kept refusing her invitations to come to that island. Knowing that Ojou-sama's character, the words "at the limit of her patience" had a very serious meaning. They were so frightening that they sent chills down my spine.

And that's when a certain individual gave her some advice.

"That Nonsense User is a terrifying maid enthusiast, so if you lend him one of your maids for a trial period, I'm sure that in ten days he won't be able to bear it and will come to the island."

In other words, from their point of view, their invitation for me this time was a godsend.

But who here is a maid enthusiast?

There's a limit to how rude you can be.

It makes me want to sue that person for defamation.

I thought it was some sort of will left behind by Maki-san before she died, but that wasn't the case. It was the suggestion of one of the two geniuses who were on the island when Maki-san was killed from Hikari-san's story, the one that's left when you take the cook out of the equation.

That someone.

It was Kasugai Kasuga.

"That woman....."

Is she trying to return the favor?

She was a pain in the ass up until the day she left.

.....

It's a nice place, she said.

After leaving the hotel on the 21st, Hikari-san didn't take the train out of the city, but instead took the bus with me to the antique apartment.

"I apologize for this being like a sneak attack."

That's what Hikari-san said on the bus, but "like" isn't the most suitable expression in this case. It was a superb sneak attack. It was perfect, as if it was a surprise attack from Wakayama prefecture. (TL: Might be a reference to the Shōninki from the Kishū province in Wakayama)

A private conversation.

Exchanging information with one of the residents from Wet Crow's Feather Island.

I was prepared for some risk, but.....

".....This looks like it's going to be very rough...."

Standing in front of the antique apartment, Hikari-san had a shocked expression on her face.

"Honestly, I never imagined that you would live in such a run down place."

Her arms were shaking violently.

It looked like she was trembling with excitement.

Hikari-san was a neat freak.

She really liked to clean.

Unexpectedly, she might've been the right person at the right place.

"But Hikari-san. Are you serious?"

"Yes, very serious."

Hikari-san clenched her fist tightly.

"Please let me call you Master!"

"....."

.....It was a splendid blow.

Well, that's why...

Following Kasugai-san from last month, this month's roommate was Chiga Hikari-san. It felt like I couldn't argue against whatever Miiko-san had to say about it. No, Miiko-san didn't say anything in particular, but Nanananami had a lot of sarcastic remarks for me. It was humiliating to let her say what she wanted, but I resigned myself to it. I couldn't help it.

That was also how I felt in regards to Hikari-san.

I won't explain further than that.

Then, returning to the main subject, today.

The 26th of September.

I was summoned by Kunagisa Tomo.

I received a call early in the morning. As usual, I couldn't make any sense of what she was trying to say when having a conversation over the phone, but if I were to use a bit of imagination, it seems that infighting within the Kunagisa Syndicate had been completely resolved as of yesterday. At the same time, the heavy guard that was on Kunagisa Tomo was reduced to a slightly lower level, so it was finally possible for her to see me after a long time.

Seeing Kunagisa Tomo is a sort of happiness.

Without comparing it to anything,

you could say without a doubt that it's happiness.

But when looking back at the situation, I wonder.

I was in a position to be targeted now.

The more people I meet, the more people I'll get involved.

Then, in that sense, when it comes to Hikari-san, I

should've forcefully turned her away. Not to mention, usually when it comes to Kunagisa, when something happens, it's fatally bad. It goes without saying, but I don't even want to think about it.

But.

Being told by Kunagisa "I want to see you," being told "I have to talk to you,"my will wasn't strong enough to turn her down.

And there was also a real problem.

I can't just focus only on Saitou Takashi. I also have something I need to think about when it comes to Kunagisa Tomo.

Things I had left aside for a long time.

From one month ago, or perhaps, from six years ago.

Maybe now is a good time.

That's what I thought.

".....It's nonsense, though."

In the end, I didn't want to turn down her invitation, and I wanted to get there as soon as possible, so I decided to take the Fiat rather than the Vespa to Shirosaki, but....

"Even if it's just the steering wheel, I can't let master hold anything heavier than chopsticks."

Hikari-san said.

"Since Nonsense User Onii-chan's recent behavior has been too much for me to handle, I'll have to place you under my supervision for a while."

Houko-chan said, so naturally she came along.

.....

Again, what is this situation?

This is what Miiko-san calls "being popular"?

Even then, it's not a very welcome way of being popular.

".....But Kasugai-san... I wondered where she went, but the fact that she ended up at Wet Crow's Feather Island....."

Certainly, for that social misfit, that place might be paradise. The only problem was that there were no young men

who were to Kasugai-san's tastes. Come to think of it, when Kasugai-san was staying at the apartment, I accidentally leaked some information about the island. If I remember correctly, Kasugai-san left on the night of the 21st of August. So she left for that island right after that?

As always, I couldn't read her.

"If that was the case, then please tell me earlier."

"Yes but, how should I say it... Kasugai is the kind of person that's hard to bring up."

I understood that well.

It was just as Hikari-san said.

Well, but just like that, that one mysterious doubt that I had on my mind had been cleared. **Because** Kasugai-san went to that island, Hikari-san could generally predict what I was going to ask her. Kasugai-san was involved considerab;y in the last case, and she knows what I've done in the last six months.

So she might have predicted it in advance.

That I wanted information on Saitou Takashi.

I think that's why Hikari-san was prepared beforehand. That's why she could give me that much information without much hesitation, as if she was already prepared.

Well...

Even if she was prepared,

she probably wished that guess was wrong.

".....That means as soon as Kasugai-san came to that island, Maki-san was killed?"

"That's right," Hikari-san nodded. "But while I shouldn't make these kinds of statements based solely on speculation, I don't think Kasugai-san is the culprit."

"Probably."

That person isn't the type who would kill someone.

She doesn't have that kind of notion to begin with.

To let live or to kill, that choice doesn't exist.

She chose not to choose.

"So it's an outsider....."

On an isolated island, that possibility is normally unlikely.

But Maki-san... she seemed to have bought a lot of grudges, so finding a suitable culprit shouldn't be hard. Even I didn't get along with her. Rather, during the week when I stayed at that island, we constantly argued with each other.

That's why when I heard that she died, I only thought it was abrupt, and honestly, this might seem cold, but I didn't feel any sadness or pity for her.

That was no surprise.

That's the kind of person I am in the first place.

But.

I had a doubt.

There's no way that person was killed.

At the very least, it shouldn't have happened for another year and a half.

After that, Hikari-san gave me some details about the situation in the closed room where Maki-san was killed, but to be honest, I didn't really understand.

The scene of the crime was Maki-san's room.

In April, when Kunagisa and I visited, the door and windows in Maki-san's room were covered with thick boards hammered in with large nails from the inside. It looked like she was preparing for a typhoon.

If a person dies in a locked room, it's clearly a suicide.

But the way she died clearly points to a murder.

Having her insides torn out and her brains splattered about.

".....Hmm."

When we parted in April, she said.

When the time comes, you should pursue the one that killed me.

I wonder.

If she knew everything beforehand, then didn't she know the identity of the person who would kill her? It's strange. Why did she choose to get herself killed without any resistance.....?

Did she sacrifice herself to destiny?

Did she sacrifice herself to the Story?

No... wait.

If it's a story, then....

Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative.

Whether it's two years or six months later, it's the same thing, and no matter who the culprit is or who they're not, it's the same thing... Is that what it is**?**

.....If so.

The Story is accelerating.

If it comes to that, her predictions can no longer be relied upon.

I see, so that's her root.

She knew everything and yet didn't say a word.

Good grief. Now I'm sure of it.

I'm sure of it now.

Himena Maki-san.

I really hate you.

"We're almost there."

Hikari-san said. Looking ahead, I could clearly see the thirty-two-story apartment building that Kunagisa used as her base. Being able to get here without getting lost even though it was the first time she's ever been on this road was a difficult task, so I complimented her on that.

"Thank you," Hikari-san said with a shy smile. "Driving a car is a lot easier than I thought. It was easier than I was worried about."

"....."

Rather than it being the first time she took this road, it was her first time driving.

Come to think of it, you don't really get a chance to drive a car on an island like that... Wait, was she driving without a license?

"Where should I park?"

"Unlike with a motorbike, we can't really park on the road, and this is also a borrowed vehicle. This'll be awkward and I

don't like it, but since we can't really turn back, please go into the underground parking lot."

"Understood master."

"....."

"? Is something the matter, master?"

"....."

"Have I done something wrong, master?"

"....."

It was kind of embarrassing.

It was a word that pierced through my heart.

But I wanted her to say it more.

After entering the underground parking lot of the apartment building, Hikari-san splendidly parked backwards next to the luxury cars of the other residents and then stopped the Fiat's engine.

Hikari-san said she'd wait in the car.

Houko-chan didn't wake up and Hikari-san felt hesitant about leaving a child alone in an empty car. Since that child was Houko-chan, I felt the same. Though, since Hikari-san and Kunagisa were close on that island, I thought it'd be better if they met.

"You haven't seen Tomo-san for a month, right?"

"Yeah, well, that's right."

"I won't ruin the mood between you two, then."

"....."

"Take care, master."

And so.

That's why I was alone from here.

Setting Hikari-san aside, it was a fortuitous thing that I didn't have to introduce Houko-chan to Kunagisa. No, it's not like I had something to feel bad about. Well, somewhat.

I took the elevator from the underground parking lot to the 32nd floor, where Kunagisa lives. Since we were checked out by the guard when we entered the parking lot, Kungisa should know that I'm coming. The time now was approximately 10

a.m.

Not bad.

Using the fingerprint scanner and a key, I opened the door. I searched for Kunagisa while avoiding the cables on the floor, ceiling, and walls that seemed to have multiplied in number since the last time I was here. They could only be described as a living creature. It's like they were burying themselves into the hallway. There were a lot of rooms in this gigantic apartment, so finding Kunagisa's small body within it was pretty hard.

Then.

"……Eh?"

I was surprised.

Kunagisa was in a room that hadn't yet suffered much mechanical encroachment with only just a sofa, a table, a huge plasma TV, and no carpeting in it, but….

She wasn't alone.

There was one other person.

"Ah, it's Ii-chan!" Turning back, Kunagisa Tomo showed me a beaming smile. "Ahahahaha! As I expected, you look really surprised!"

"……That's… well."

I answered back to Kunagisa and then looked at the other person. They were looking at the TV screen, but there wasn't anything displayed on it besides the reflection of the person's face.

I know this person.

I thought I would never see her again….

I know who this person is.

"…….It seems…"

She said.

She said like that.

She… said.

"It seems like you've grown a little, boy"

"…….Akane-san……"

No, that's wrong.

It wasn't Sonoyama Akane.

It wasn't Sonoyama Akane, one of the Seven Fools of the ER3 system, *one of the people closest to the answer to this world.*

Akane-san died on that island.

On that island, in April, she was killed.

Killed and decapitated in a locked room.

Sonoyama Akane is no more.

The one here is....

The one who committed the act of murder on Wet Crow's Feather Island

As a result, two people were slaughtered.

She killed Sonoyama Akane and then became Sonoyama Akane.

She who became her.

She whose name I didn't even know, she who is nobody.

"Akane-san is fine. I'm still calling myself that for now," she finally took her eyes off the TV screen and turned them towards me. "It's been a while, hasn't it? You look different, boy. You've really matured and grown into a reliable man."

"It's been... a while."

"You don't have to be so prepared. I didn't come to cause any harm to you or Kunagisa-chan. You should know better than anyone that I'm not that kind of person."

"That's right. She came to play."

Kunagisa said in such a cheerful tone that it felt out of place.

"She said she came back to Japan the day before yesterday."

"…….How should I say this……." I muttered to myself while taking a seat on the sofa next to Kunagisa. "……It feels like I'm seeing a ghost this early in the morning."

"A ghost, huh. It seems you've hit the nail on the head with that metaphor. It's a fitting way to describe me," she laughed. "But I'm glad to see you again, boy."

"……."

Akane-san's way of speaking.

Akane-san's attitude.

Akane-san's mannerisms.

The woman who spoke was, completely, Sonoyama Akane.

I wondered how such a thing was possible.

What happened in April...

Even after the truth of everything was explained to me by Aikawa Jun, even after I was told about the existence of the woman who could become someone else, some part of me remained unconvinced.

I had some reservations.

I wasn't relieved.

But if you see the real thing in person.

If you see it right in front of you, you just have to accept it.

She who was nobody, she who didn't have a name,

at this moment,

only at this moment,

The member of the Seven Fools who was decapitated on that island.

She was Sonoyama Akane herself.

"Don't look so grim. Though, *I* am the one telling you that. But, well, it's fine. Don't worry, don't worry, boy. I'm about to go home, anyway."

"……You're going home?"

"Yeah. The show just finished."

It seems that the TV had just been turned off.

The nameless woman stood up.

"Then, Kunagisa-chan, I'll take my leave."

"Yeah, bye bye, Akane-chan."

Kunagisa nonchalantly called her by the name of Sonoyama Akane. She called her by that name, as if the woman who wasn't Akane-san was actually Akane-san. What does that mean? It's not like she doesn't understand, and yet she still exchanged words with her with a smile.

It was all the same to her.

It made me realize.

Once more, it made me realize.

Someone like me couldn't match up to these two.

"Ah, right, right."

Just when she was about to leave, she turned back.

"Boy, just one thing, I'll let you in on something interesting."

"……What is it?"

"Who I'm trying to become next."

She smiled mischievously.

"Soon, I'll be tired of calling myself Sonoyama Akane. I'll lose interest in the existence of Sonoyama Akane. After three more months, I'll be done with this name.

"…….You get bored more quickly than I thought."

"I'm greedy."

She said plainly.

"My next target is Aikawa Jun."

"……!"

Kunagisa didn't seem particularly surprised.

Maybe she'd already heard it.

But I couldn't hide my shivers.

"Her uncovering my plans back in April is still fresh in my mind. It was a first for me. How could I, this me, have my thoughts traced by someone else?"

"……"

From the point of view of herself, who had made tracing other people her purpose in life, it was probably humiliating.

"So I think I'll become her next time."

"That's absurd……."

I lowered my gaze and muttered.

"There's no way you can do that……."

"What makes you say that?"

However, she wasn't frightened at all.

It was just like when we talked on that island.

Déjà vu.

"According to my research, Aikawa Jun seems to be missing at the moment. Nobody knows where she is. No one can

determine whether she's still alive or not. That's how it is, boy. Aikawa Jun is nowhere to be found, right? If you're not there, then you don't exist. With conditions this good, it'll be a lot easier than it was in April. After all, I won't have to kill the real thing."

"No... but..."

But Aikawa-san.

Aikawa Jun is Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

"Aikawa Jun, Humanity's Strongest Contractor... I feel something close to myself in her, boy. I erase myself completely, and my ultimate goal is to replace someone else. That's what my life is all about. Meanwhile, Aikawa Jun is always a *contractor*, always someone's alternative, someone else's substitute. She's just like me."

The woman who becomes someone else.

The woman who represents someone else.

There **is** a common point.

Then is it possible?

For this nameless woman, this nobody.

With her ability, with her talents,

to replace Aikawa Jun.

"You know, boy, humans..."

She said.

"Essentially, they can become whatever they want to become."

"....."

"I've already talked about what kind of dissatisfaction you have with who you are back on that island, and as a result, your current appearance is the future you that you had wished for back then."

My future self.

My future self, as seen from the past.

"But my view of Aikawa Jun is not like that. She's surely just like me. Similar to me and also the same as me," she said as if gloating. "However, she surely doesn't want to become

anyone."

"……Doesn’t want to become anyone."

"If you don't want to become anything, then you can become anything."

Not being bound by what you want to be.

Being able to become everything.

Being able to be everything.

"This is something that I always think when I want to become someone else, so don't think too much of it, but right now, I’m certain that I was born to become Aikawa Jun."

"……"

"Goodbye. We won't meet again."

Those were her parting words.

The woman whose name I didn't know, and who was nobody, left.

Turning her back towards me and without looking back, she left.

The sound of the front door opening and closing.

All at once.

I lost all the strength in my body.

I thought my legs had given out.

"……Hey."

As if taking it out on her, I glared at Kunagisa.

"If she's here then say it. From the look of things, she was already here when you called me."

"Sorry, sorry. I wanted to surprise you."

Kunagisa didn't seem to feel bad at all.

Probably because that’s really all there was to it.

When she thinks that something might surprise me, she surprises me.

Kunagisa likes this sort of bad prank.

Without thinking it's in bad taste or that it's even a prank.

"No, well, there was also that Akane-chan wanted to see Ii-chan too. Since it was a special occasion, I set for the time of the two meetings to overlap.

"Set, huh....." I hung my head. "Well, she also probably waited for the guard around Kunagisa to loosen, so in that sense this meeting was inevitable. So what the hell did she want, anyway? I assume she didn't come just to watch TV on a big screen or just to see our faces, right? Did she actually harm you?"

"It's okay," Kunagisa smiled. "She just asked me a couple of questions about Jun-chan."

"About Aikawa-san.....?"

"Looks like Akane-chan is serious," Kunagisa said, closing one eye and sticking out her tongue. "Boku-sama-chan has the same opinion as Ii-chan, I think it's impossible. That's what I said, but it felt like she didn't listen. Like preaching to the deaf or lecturing the Buddha."

"Those two sayings have completely different meanings."

"But it's the same phenomenon."

"Well, yeah, it's the same thing. Anyway, whether she's deaf or the Buddha, it has no connection to us."

"Yeah, I guess so."

In the end.

It's her and Aikawa Jun's problem.

Since the incident in April was, in the end, a confrontation between the two of them, there was no room for me or Kunagisa to get involved.

It's unrelated.

I can probably just say that.

While being powerless.

While being apathetic.

"Tomo, well, I'll ask just in case, but you're... no, it's you we're talking about here. Do you know where Aikawa-san is right now and what she's doing? Even if you don't know now, can you find out by seeking it? I'm not asking you to find out, I'm just asking whether you can or not."

"Hmm. I don't know. I think we should take everything about Jun-chan as an exception, so I can't really be certain. I

could ask Chii-kun, but no matter how much of a seeker he is, Jun-chan is... Chii-kun might hide it on purpose. If Jun-chan is hiding of her own will, no one can find her."

"Hmm....."

"I also said that to Akane-chan earlier too, but in my personal opinion, I wouldn't be surprised if she was dead. It's not like Jun-chan is an immortal monster."

"She is a monster. That person."

"She's not a monster, she's a human being."

".....Well, that's right, but..."

As usual, or rather, how should I put it, she's always very dry about that kind of thing. After all this time though, I'm not surprised.

She could be dead. That's true.

A death theory.

She and Niounomiya Izumu killed each other at the same time.

If that's the case, then...

That would be her field of speciality.

It's unrelated. That's all I can say

While being powerless.

While being apathetic.

"Well, setting that aside, Tomo. Thinking about it, it's pretty rare for you to call me here. Do you need something?"

"Is it bad to call you here without needing something?"

"It's not that, but recently I've been in a maelstrom of trouble...."

"As usual."

"Well, it's as usual, but...."

That's right, it's as usual.

It's something that's been going on for a long time.

It's something that began a long time ago.

"Well, let's see. Yes, I have a request. Or rather, it's news that'd be good for Ii-chan to hear."

"Good news?"

"No, no, it’s news that you should hear. Whether it's good news or bad news, that’s for Ii-chan to decide."

".....I’ll hope that it’s good news," I said. "Is it something related to the Kunagisa Syndicate? "

"Well, yeah, but at the same time it's also about Boku-sama-chan," Kunagisa said. "Umm, I told you over the phone that the conflict within the organization ended yesterday, right?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I only heard that it ended, so I don't know anything concrete. What happened? Even if it wasn’t something like six years ago, there was a lot of damage, wasn't there?"

"Uni. No, aside from the beginning, it seems that almost nobody has died since we entered September. It’s a miracle."

"Hmm. Well, I am somewhat interested, but first, setting all of that aside, I'm worried about Nao-san. Is he fine?"

"Speaking of the conclusion..."

Kunagisa laughed innocently and with satisfaction.

"Nao-kun began his new job as the head of the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"....."

"Ta-dhaa!"

From secretary of the leader to leader.

That's quite a big promotion.

Since Nao-san is a direct descendant, I always thought he would eventually rise to the position of leading the Kunagisa Syndicate, but I always thought that was still a few decades away.

"I haven’t heard any of the details, since Boku-sama-chan isn’t interested in them either, but it seems that Nao-kun was able to take great advantage of the infighting."

"Hmm... go on."

"Right. So now Nao-kun controls a quarter of the world. Scary, scary." Kunagisa declared that absurd fact as if she was having a lot of fun. "Therefore, Boku-sama-chan is now able to

reconcile with the Kunagisa House."

"……Is that so?"

I was a bit perplexed.

Rather than being surprised, I was perplexed.

Even if Nao-kun became the head of the Syndicate, is it really something that simple? The separation between the Kunagisa House and Kunagisa Tomo wasn't something that simple. Even if Nao-san is obsessed with Kunagisa Tomo to the point where you could call it insane-

"It's fine," Kunagisa said. "Because of the conflict, everyone except Nao-kun retired."

"Retired…….?"

"Well, some were seriously injured and some weren't, but still they all retired of their own will. The only person currently left in the Kunagisa House is Nao-kun. That's why **something can be done**. It seems that even before this happened within the organization, the people who wanted to bring back Boku-sama-chan, who is a direct descendant, outnumbered those who were against it"

"……."

"Though it's not anything official yet."

"……Your father, your grandfather, your grandmother, and the rest of the family… so all of them retired… it really makes you feel the passage of time."

It was a blunt way of putting it.

For me, six years ago, that was still the present.

But now it was completely the past.

That's right.

After all, it was six years ago.

The more I thought about it, the more futile it became.

"……After going back to the Syndicate, what will happen? Will you have to go back to Kobe?"

"Hmm? Nothing will change. It'll be as always. My pay will just get better, I guess."

"So you intend to receive even more pay……."

"And I like Kyoto."

Kunagisa lightly swung her shoulders.

"Ii-chan also seems to like Kyoto."

"I... not really, anywhere is fine. If you go back to Kobe, I'll go back with you."

"So you'll follow me?"

"Of course. I'm from that area. I've been ready to quit college at any time too."

Rather, it was already the 26th of September, so summer break was over and classes started a long time ago, but in the end, I didn't go at all. I didn't intend to either. I was just relaxing at home with Hikari-san. No, Hikari-san was working hard while I was relaxing.

To begin with, I didn't attend school for any purpose.

It was just a way to stave off boredom, a way to kill time.

Something to do, that's all.

"Thank you." Kunagisa smiled at my words. "But it's fine. Going back to headquarters would just be a hassle and I can work here too. That's why nothing will change from how it is now."

"Hmm. I see."

But it's abrupt.

Too abrupt.

Even though it was an internal conflict, I didn't think it would be of this magnitude. At most, I thought that the combination of the seven under the Kunagisa Syndicate would change, but this is too abrupt.

It's as if it's accelerating.

Everything seems to be accelerating.

Then that means it's a sudden...

Coincidence.

The timing matched.

Aikawa-san's disappearance, the conflict in the Kunagisa Syndicate, and Himena Maki's death. That they all occurred at the same time stands out as a significant theory.

Regardless of the extent of its truthfulness.

"That's the first piece of news."

"Huh? Is there a second?"

"Yes. Well, the second one is more important. It's about my body."

"……*Body?*"

"Ah, before that, Ii-chan."

Kunagisa turned around while staying seated and showed me her back.

"Do my hair."

"…….Okay."

It's been a long time since we've had this exchange. I didn't have a comb, so I used my fingers to comb through Kungisa's hair.

Blue hair.

The proof of abnormality.

Recessive genes, huh.

"Didn't I tell you before?"

Kunagisa began to speak in that position.

While combing her hair,

"Huh?"

I asked.

"What did you say before?"

"I had to receive a thorough examination."

"……"

Silence.

I didn't want her to notice it.

I didn't want to let her notice the shock that had instantly spread to every corner of my body, so I continued to comb Kunagisa's hair at the same unchanging pace. "Hmm. Did you say that?" I responded casually, as if it were nothing at all.

It's something that I left behind.

Something I didn't want to touch.

"Just two or three more years….."

I didn't want to hear it.

I didn't want to talk about it.

No matter what, I want to keep it vague.

I want to keep the possibility, the choice, alive.

That's what I thought.

But Kunagisa said it as if it was nothing.

Furthermore, it was an unexpected word.

"No, apparently that's not the case."

".....Not the case? Don't tell me it's an even shorter period, or something like that."

"Apparently I'm growing."

Despite my misgivings, Kunagisa said in a matter of fact tone.

"My body is starting to function normally."

"....."

"They took it as an abnormality in the last exam, but apparently it was not an abnormality, it's just that I'm returning to normal."

"....Umm."

I was confused.

I thought about the meaning of those words.

Calm down.

Be careful to not make any convenient misunderstanding.

Understand it carefully.

Be sure to not make any errors. It's something important.

Growth.

Up until now, Kunagisa's bodily functions had stopped for a long period of time, but were now returning to a normal state.... is that what this means?

Then.

"So... is it fine now?"

"Yes."

Kunagisa nodded.

"So... now there's no need to be worried?"

"Yes."

Kunagisa nodded.

"So... you won't die again?"

"Yes."

I embraced her.

From behind, I embraced Kunagisa Tomo.

"……Congratulations."

"It hurts."

"I'm happy."

"It hurts."

"…..I'm really happy."

"I'm saying it hurts! I'm serious!"

Kunagisa raged.

That's quite rare.

I hurriedly untied my arms.

Instantly, I came to and thought back to what I just did and what I just said. A feeling of shame washed over me, making me want to disappear.

Kunagisa turned around.

Ah, this is bad……

Was I able to maintain a blank face?

My emotions were in turmoil.

Kunagisa was looking at me with her big blue eyes.

Blank pupils.

Eyes that were peeking inside of me.

Within those pupils, I was reflected.

Hey, hey……..

What is that face?

"Ii-chan."

"……."

"Ii-chan, Ii-chan."

"…..Wh-what is it?"

"Ii-chan, I love you."

This time, Kunagisa hugged me.

I was relieved.

That's right, this is how it should be.

I can't embrace from my side.

Ah, it feels good.

I could almost forget all the problems I had.

It makes me want to abandon everything.

Seriously.

I just want to disappear like this.

"…..But you know."

Gently, Kunagisa untied her arms from my neck.

"Ii-chan, you really haven't changed."

"……"

Those were the same words that she used last time.

My lack of change.

As usual.

For the Nonsense User.

"Ii-chan really doesn't change at all. And you're still worried about it."

"…….About what?"

"About six years ago."

Six years ago.

I looked away, awkwardly.

"There's no way I could forget, right?"

"Is that so?"

"I mean, you… because of me…"

"We've already talked about it so many times that I don't want to repeat it anymore," Kunagisa stood up. With me sitting, the position of her head was higher than mine. "Boku-sama-chan doesn't resent Ii-chan at all, you know?"

"……"

"In the first place, there's not a single thing that happened to me because of Ii-chan. **Ii-chan didn't break me at all.** You already know that, don't you? Since the day we first met, Boku-sama-chan has always been like this, right? I was born like this. I was born abnormal. Just like Professor Kyouichirou said."

"That's……."

That way of putting it. I didn't like it.

Admitting the words of that professor.

"Even so, I understand that Ii-chan holds feelings of guilt towards Boku-sama-chan, or rather, the feeling of wanting to be forgiven. I understand that you feel that way. I really understand that. I think you did enough to deserve that. I think you did that much for me. Probably. But even then, there's no forgiving or not forgiving. Because in the first place, Boku-sama-chan didn't mind it at all."

"……You say that, but."

In the first place.

What Kunagisa thinks isn't the problem.

It's what I did.

What I ended up doing.

That's the problem.

I've sinned.

So I have to repent.

I shouldn't be forgiven.

It's not like I'm asking for forgiveness.

I don't want to be forgiven.

Being forgiven after having committed a sin…

Isn't that just the worst?

"Right. Basically, it's a matter of pride for Ii-chan," Kunagisa said. "Now, the problem has changed to one that Ii-chan must solve by himself, without Boku-sama-chan."

"My….. problem?"

"At the very least, the damage that you inflicted on me, and the damage that you think you inflicted on me has all been healed, right? I mean, I could go on and on. I don't know how many times I have to repeat myself, but none of that was Ii-chan's fault."

"But……."

"No buts. You just did your best and it ended up like that. If I may put it this way though, it's just that Ii-chan is morbidly afraid of anyone other than himself being hurt. No matter who gets hurt you will always blame yourself for it."

Wounds.

Flaws.

Defects.

"But you shouldn't look down on me. The wounds I received six years ago from Ii-chan are nothing for Boku-sama-chan. Not to copy Neon-chan's catchphrase, but it's just a scratch."

"....."

"If anything, maybe I should've received a more serious wound,"Kunagisa said and sat back down on the sofa. "I think it's a bit different from Ii-chan, who just pretends that he's fine."

"But I am....."

"I don't know about what kind of *maelstrom of trouble* Ii-chan is currently in right now, but, well, to be honest, thinking about last month's case, it's not like I can't imagine it, but anyway, Ii-chan should look at himself first. Because even Boku-sama-chan can't understand the pain of other people's wounds."

"....."

If another person were to get hurt, I would bear the wounds myself.

But even if I do that.

No one will understand the pain of those wounds.

The scars would never go away.

"Someone who truly understands the pain of others, that would be the Akane-chan *of now*. Either that person, or the one who can be anyone's alternative, Jun-chan. It may just be them."

"Aikawa-san..."

What about Aikawa-san? That person often says something like "I don't understand other people's feelings" as a catchphrase, but I'm sure that Aikawa-san keeps in mind the feelings that she doesn't understand. That's why, paradoxically, she's able to understand the feelings of others.

She can imagine what other people are feeling.

She can empathize with the pain of others.

But.

That's why Aikawa-san will never understand. A hawk looking down at the earth from the sky cannot read the hearts of the bugs crawling on the ground. Even if she understands, it's a completely one-way understanding. That kind of understanding....

With or without it, it's the same thing.

"When you're in pain, it's fine to say it, you know? Ii-chan. Boku-sama-chan will spoil Ii-chan with all my might."

Kunagisa fiddled with her hair.

Then she smiled at me.

"If you ever decide that it's fine to get me involved, just let me know at any time. I'll come save you right away."

"....."

"You can do my hair later. Before that, Ii-chan, can you make me something? Boku-sama-chan is hungry."

".....Understood."

"There should be a lot of ingredients that Akane-san brought with her in the fridge."

"Okay."

I got up and left the room.

But two steps down the corridor, I thought back and turned around. It seems that Kunagisa's mind had already moved on to something else as she was watching TV on the big screen when I returned.

"Hmm?" She tilted her head.

"Is there something wrong, Ii-chan?"

"Umm, er, Tomo."

"What is it?"

"I lov-"

"Eh?"

"Ah, no."

I shook my head.

"What does ICPO stand for?"

"International Criminal Police Organisation."
"Thank you."

2

I thought that Hikari-san might come up along with the awakened Houko-chan after I had finished making a meal, eating it, washing the dishes, and killing some time in Kunagisa's room afterwards. However, there seemed to be no sign of that and I decided that it would be a bad idea to keep them waiting in the parking lot. I parted with Kunagisa and took the elevator straight down to the underground parking lot. In the hall...

I encountered the fox-masked man.

"……!? Wha……"

"Yo, my enemy."

The fox-masked man casually took one look at me and immediately turned his attention back to the manga he was holding. As if he didn't care that I had taken a defensive stance in an instant, he turned to the next page of the manga.

It was sudden.

Once again it was sudden, but there was no error.

There's no way it's a different person.

That kind of error is impossible.

No one else has this kind of atmosphere.

A kimono that looked like burial clothes.

A slim body that gave a refreshing image.

And a fox mask.

"……Guuuuh……."

My breathing was disrupted.

Disgusting sweat trickled down my cheeks.

Even though nothing was done to me.

Even though nothing was done to me.

Just being there, right in front of me, just by existing, just by feeling that he's here, itwas suffocating. It was hard to be

alive. This overwhelming feeling of being overwhelmed. This transcendental feeling of transcendence.

Yes, this certainly.

Resembles Aikawa Jun.

That humanity's strongest, the color red.

But why here?

In the basement of Kunagisa's apartment building.

What was the guard doing?

Hikari-san... Houko-chan... were they okay?

Is he alone? Did he come alone?

What about Kino-san and the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*?

Are you saying they're hidden somewhere?

Am I.

Am I alive?

Various questions passed through my head.

But really, this wasn't the time to answer them.

Because right now, I was facing the worst.

Because right now, I was confronting the man who should be dead.

"....."

"....."

No.....

Is it not a confrontation?

The fox-masked man wasn't looking at me.

This whole time he was just looking down at his manga.

It was as if we were old acquaintances who just happened to meet at the library. It was like he wasn't even aware of me. It was as if the contents of his manga took precedence over me.

But there was no way this could be a coincidence.

This kind of coincidence doesn't exist.

This was doubtlessly arranged.

What a guy.....

On top of that, he decided to ambush me in the basement of Kunagisa's apartment building of all places.

Kunagisa's.

Kunagisa Tomo's.

No... calm down.

Don't just let yourself be overwhelmed.

The only thing Kino-san knew about Kunagisa is that she calls me *Ii-chan*, but that means it's a fact that they already knew about her, and the level of security around Kunagisa was finally lowered today. In other words, they probably thought that it was inevitable that I would come visit her today. That was the same reason why I encountered that nobody, that woman whose name I don't even know in Kunagisa's room. That's why it was perfectly normal for the fox man to ambush me here.

But.....

Logically, in my head, I understood that, but.....

My body.

My body refused to understand.

It refused logic.

"Kukuku."

Having finished reading his manga, the fox-masked man finally turned his body to face me. Since the fox-masked man was way taller than me, I immediately felt like I was being looked down upon.

"It looks like you took care of Raichi."

".....I didn't particularly do anything," I answered carefully. "I really can't imagine Kino-san being in the same league as Izumu-kun or Rizumu-chan, but since you said that line, that means he **really** was one of *Thirteen Stairs*... he's beyond me."

"'Beyond me.' Hmm," the fox-masked man repeated my words clearly with a bored tone. "From the looks of it, it seems you've almost finished investigating me, my enemy."

".....Well, who knows."

"'Well, who knows.' Hmm. That's not a very pleasant answer. You'll lose friends if you give people that kind of answer. Well, it's fine. I don't really care. But I've just finished

my investigation of you, my enemy."

"…..Thanks for that."

"So that's why Kigamine was interested in you… no, I don't know **how far** Kigamine went. That's now an endless mystery. You really are a lot like me. It was like looking at my own history."

"That wasn't so much the case for me, though."

"Don't be so stubborn, my enemy. The various instruments that coloured your life were all nostalgic for me. Before I was expelled from karma, they were all the guys I played along with. The Kunagisa Syndicate, the ER3 System. And you… you also met with Zerozaki Hitoshiki in May, right? You were involved with the worst of the *Killing Names*, the Zerozaki clan. I sure was taken aback."

"……..Those were just coincidences, though."

"I wonder just how many have died because of those coincidences."

"……."

"Well, no matter how many died, it's all the same. Oh right, if I could add one more thing, I heard that you were also present at the scene of the collapse of Sumiyuri Academy. In other words, you were involved with the Four Gods and One Mirror, huh? In just 19 years, you were involved with **almost the entire world**, especially in the last six months. What's up with that? Kukuku. It's just what I would expect of my enemy."

"If you were able to find out that much, then you're quite something yourself, Saitou Takashi-san."

"Oops. It's not yet the time to call me by that name. Not yet, it's not yet the time to name myself."

"……."

Even now… not yet, huh.

Then, well, I half expected it, but he has no intention of **settling things** here and now.

I relaxed just a little.

I would rather avoid doing something **here**.

But after all, if you think about it, that should be no surprise. Certainly, this fox-masked man isn't the type to advance things that easily.

He’s not the type to advance the Story that easily.

The key word is acceleration.

And the end of the world.

Above all, the end of the story.

In the end, even if he calls me his *enemy* and sees me as his enemy, I’m not the focal point. He is only staring at the world, at the Story, and at the fate that exists behind me.

So... what should I do, then?

How should I get through this?

How should I...

Survive.

"The *Thirteen Stairs*..."

The first one to break the silence was the fox-masked man.

".....Finally, all members are present."

"All members... if I remember correctly, I heard last time that not even half of them were here. That’s what you told me, right?"

"Yeah. With Rizumu and Izumu missing, I had to look for quite a few people. I had a list of candidates to begin with, so it wasn’t such a hassle, but... Hmm. Honestly, though, there were some disappointments. What with the incident with Hagihara Shiogi and also with the Niounomiya siblings, they are far from the best members. Hmm. At first I imagined a more intellectual group, but it ended up being quite far from my expectations."

".....My condolences."

"Well, whether they’re the best members or not, it's all the same either way. After all, it's just a matter of numbers."

The same thing, huh.

It’s that line again.

That line that sees everything as being of equal value.

Even the exact opposite concepts can be interchanged, everything is identical.

He can only see everything as the same thing.

Everything is everything's alternative.

Parts that can be changed.

You can see the nerve of the person who immediately filled the hole left by Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan with new members.

The Niounomiya siblings.

Setting Izumu-kun aside.

Rizumu-chan seemed to have admired him.

"In short, I came here today to declare war."

The man with the fox man said.

I couldn't tell because of the mask, but there was a laugh.

"Raichi was supposed to be the one who should have done it, but you didn't read it, right? The letter that Raichi gave you."

"It's because you put people in between us."

"Don't say that, my enemy. My body has already been expelled from causality. For everything I do, I need someone else to be my arms and legs."

".....Even then, I never even got to touch that letter... He misunderstood up until the very end, he thought that the person who had come to visit me that day was actually me."

"Asano Miiko, right?"

".....Yes."

Miiko-san's name too... he knows it.

I felt like clicking my tongue. Well, if he investigated me, I guess it's natural for him to look into my neighbors.....

.....No, wait.

That's not it.

This is different.

How does he know that the person who visited me was Miiko-san.....

"But, my enemy. Don't think that Raichi is an idiot. He may be an idiot, but not to that extent. He doesn't have a simpleness like Rizumu, a *weakness* like Rizumu."

"But... then."

"**I** deceived Raichi. I'm the one who got him confused. I was with Raichi until the hospital reception. There I saw a nurse with an awfully short skirt and your neighbour talking, so thinking that this was also fate, I told Raichi **something that wasn't true**."

"……Why would you?"

"Don't glare at me like that. I apologized to Raichi after."

"Not that, why…"

Why did he make him mistake Miiko-san for me? Why was that necessary? It was as if everything that happened in that hospital was just a pre-established harmony for the fox-masked man.

Pre-established harmony.

A farce of pre-established harmony.

"Are you planning something?"

"Whether I'm planning something or not, it's all the same."

"Kukuku," the fox-masked man laughed.

The same thing, huh.

Well, that might be the case for me, but for the fox-masked man, that's not necessarily the case.

"……Then… Mr. Fox. Apart from that, there is something else that bothers me. Something which Kino-san said that I can't understand."

"What?"

"'You will absolutely not die.' Kino-san said something like this. It seemed like you were the one to have said that to him, but what exactly is the meaning of those words?"

"……You've arrived at a good point, my enemy."

The fox-masked man might have smiled.

Maybe he wasn't smiling.

I couldn't see his expression.

But I could feel his gaze.

He was probably gazing at me.

He was glaring at me like he was having fun.

You will not die.

Is that about *the research into not dying*?

No, it didn't have the same nuance.....

The whole time it bothered me.

"But..."

The fox-masked man, however, refused to answer.

"It's not yet the time to tell you about that, my enemy."

Then the fox-masked man took out a letter from the sleeve of his kimono.

It was the same white envelope as on that day.

"....."

"Take it, my enemy," the fox-masked man said. "This time, nobody is between us, it's coming directly from me. For this me who was expelled from causality to do something so direct is quite an exception. Please don't make me do the impossible too much."

".....What is that....."

"An invitation to a party."

The fox-masked man seemed very delighted.

Because of his mask, I couldn't read his expression.

Even though I could read it, I could tell that he was delighted.

What's fun?

What's so fun?

Just watching made me feel irritated.

My heart was on edge.

"The date, the time and place, and the other attendants are all noted there. You can bring as many friends as you'd like. I've made sure that there **will be more food than you can eat**."

"....."

"What is it? Are you scared?"

".....I'm scared. Really scared."

I...

As if snatching it away, I took the envelope from him.

"That's why using that fear I'm gonna take you and your stupid ideas, your bullshit philosophy...."

"And I will kill, dismember, gather it, line it all up and expose it."

The fox-masked man took off his mask.

And laughed evilly.

"……You're the worst."

"As are you."

Hmm, the fox-masked man snorted.

His face looked so much like Aikawa-san's that it was almost revolting. At the very least, if he called himself her *father*, you couldn't see otherwise.

"I'll give you a hint then, since the current state of affairs is out of balance, I'll give you a little handicap. Just to make the party more lively."

"Hint….."

"Go to Fukuoka. There's a man there you know very well."

The fox-masked man put his mask back on.

Once more, his expression couldn't be read.

It couldn't be understood.

"What that man will tell you depends on you, it depends on your skill. At the very least, there are not many days left."

"Not many days……?"

"That means we're running out of time. The month of September is not a very long one."

Clonk!

The fox-masked man's steps echoed.

As he passed by my side.

It seems like he was planning to leave.

I had no intention of seeing him off. I didn't even want to turn back, but…

"Right, right."

The fox-masked man said as he turned the corner of the pillar.

"That island..."

With an unmotivated voice, as if saying it as an add on.

"That fortune-teller..."

As casually as telling me what he ate for dinner yesterday.

"...I killed her."

"....................!"

"As an exile from causality, I did not have a direct hand in the matter, but I was the one who gave the order. Even though I want to see the world's end, there's no meaning in it if I don't see it myself. **If I'm told about parts that I haven't read yet, it makes me lose interest**."

".....YOU!"

I turned back and ran.

I followed after the fox-masked man's back and turned the corner, but he wasn't there. He couldn't have gone far, so I rushed in the direction I thought he went. If I remember correctly, the fox-masked man's car was a white two-seater Porsche. It's a car that stands out on the street, but in that parking lot it's just like all the others. So not the color, the sound. The sound of the engine. Don't miss the sound of the engine....

And.

Headlights shined in front of me.

High beam.

Blinded by that light, I reflexively dodged.

A white porsche.

The fox-masked man was seated in the driver's seat.

I dodged to the left, so he was far away now.

Not only was he far away, but on top of that, the person sitting in the passenger seat blocked my view of the fox-masked man.

It was a strange figure.

It passed me for just a moment.

It was an instant, so I couldn't quite grasp it's appearance.

But.

A small, childlike body.

A yukata as if they were going to a summer festival.

Wearing a baseball cap facing the wrong way, and...

A fox mask.

However, it wasn't something that the fox-masked man would wear. It looked like it was something targeted at young children, something that you might see being sold at a summer festival.

That fox mask.

Glanced at me.

Our gazes crossed for a moment.

I felt like they crossed.

But that's all it was.

It was just that.

The Porsche didn't slow down, but rather accelerated and then left the underground parking lot. I thought about sounding the alarm and contacting security, but I didn't think that would do any good. They had managed to get past security and enter. There's no way they didn't think of a way to escape.

Shit. They escaped.

What a parting remark.

He killed Maki-san? Who did? Someone in the *Thirteen Stairs*? How? Maki-san's *prediction*, her fortune telling, even though he may have learned about it by researching about me.....

That person, the fox-masked man.

He knew about the ER3 System, the Kunagisa Syndicate, the Sumiyuri Academy... even after having named a bunch of different points, having even known about Maki-san's name, in the end, he never mentioned a thing about Aikawa-san.

Aikawa Jun.

The currently missing contractor.

Isn't she you daughter.....?

Aren't you worried about your daughter?

It's not the time to be concerned about me, is it?

If you're a father.

If you have a parent's mannerisms.

"....."

But.....

The *yukata* in that passenger seat... another fox.

Well, considering that the fox-masked man rode directly into enemy lines, it wouldn't be surprising if he came with a bodyguard. I had considered the possibility, but is that all it was? What's with this feeling of discomfort and irritation?

I can't explain it, but I felt like I met them somewhere before. Is it my imagination.....? In that moment, I couldn't even tell their face, their body, or if they were a man or a woman. I couldn't even tell whether or not it was just my imagination.

Are they also a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*?

.....Shit.

This is hard to deal with.

Not to borrow the words of Iria-san, but...

Aimlessly, as if teasing.

When I think about its acceleration, I still can't reach a conclusion.

It seems quick and lazy.

No amount of haste will advance the story.

Every time something is consumed, the foreshadowing gets more complex.

Nothing, no matter what you do, will get through.

Aimlessly, it accelerates.

Like the relation between time and gravity.

Theory of relativity.

So, in the end, the Story is relative.

Thirteen Stairs, huh?

He said Fukuoka.....

But I've never been to Kyushu.....

".....Um."

Suddenly, a voice came from behind me. Surprised, I turned

around to see Hikari-san dressed in a maid's uniform staring at me, slumped on the ground of the parking lot, with worried eyes.

"I came because I heard a loud noise. Did something happen?"

"No... it's nothing," I stood up with Hikari-san's help. "I've always had a habit of making weird noises when I'm alone."

"Oh... that's a bad habit."

Exactly, I said as I shrugged.

She can't find out. I shouldn't make her needlessly worried. I didn't meet anyone in this parking lot. I just need to make it seem like nothing happened.

"What about Houko-chan?"

"She's completely asleep. From what I can tell, she must not have been getting much sleep lately....."

"? I wonder why. I think growing up is supposed to make you sleepy, but in middle school, I was only awake one out of every three days."

"That was surely an illness, master."

"........Should we go home?"

"Yes."

Hikari-san smiled.

"Let me drive again."

".....Hikari-san... you don't have a license, do you?"

"Ara. Don't take me for an idiot. Even if I grew up in a garden and am ignorant about the world, I've at least done that. When I turned 18, I paid for it properly."

"....."

The maid who grew up in a garden and was ignorant about the world was boasting, but for the little ones in front of the TV, let me tell you, a license isn't something that you buy with money.

I didn't have the energy to respond with that, so of course I didn't have the energy to drive the car either. I sat down in the passenger's seat, despite some hesitation. I glanced at the back

seat and saw that Houko-chan was sleeping soundly.

Hikari-san sat in the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Ah, that's right, master."

"……..What is it?"

"I have a question, if you don't mind. It may be none of my business, it may be a small detail, but I have a tendency of being bothered by small details. A thought occurred to me while I was waiting."

"Ask whatever."

I waited for Hikari-san's question, while thinking that we certainly had a conversation like this back on the island too.

"Umm... I believe you heard about Aikawa-san's disappearance while you were in the hospital. That's what you said, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"I thought you heard about it when Kunagisa-san came to visit you in the hospital, but today was the first time you saw her in a month, right?"

"Yes. I refrained from contacting Kunagisa during the conflict in the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"Then master, who exactly did you hear from about Aikawa-san's disappearance?"

"……."

It was an astute point.

I hesitated for a bit with my answer.

But in the end, I answered honestly.

"From the Great Thief who came to visit me……"

0

The rabbit did its best for the lion.

1

The next day.

I headed towards Fukuoka on the bullet train.

I took the Vespa to Kyoto Station, left it at a nearby parking lot, and bought a bullet train ticket from an automatic ticket machine. Naturally, it was unreserved seating. Considering that I was travelling to an unknown place, I decided to refrain from wasting money. It was just before noon on a weekday, so there'd be passengers who'd leave the train at the next station, Shin-Osaka. So even in the worst case, I'd only have to endure until the next station before I could get a seat.

It takes about three hours to Hakata Station.

I plan to come back on the same day and I haven't made any reservations at an inn, so I can't take it too easy. For my business... rather, for my *objective*, it should take me at most a few hours. Honestly, I wanted to head to Kyushu as soon as I got back from Kunagisa's apartment, but it took me longer than expected to shake off Hikari-san and Houko-chan. I'm someone who has spent the last nineteen years thinking about nothing but running away from others, about outwitting other people, so evading pursuits or tails was my specialty. Thanks to that I was able to escape from a demonic killer's blade in May. That's why I thought I could easily lose those two if I wanted to, but I was too soft.

Houko-chan was merciless.

And Hikari-san was a pro.

It was frightening.

I don't want to remember.

Even the thought of giving up and letting them accompany me had passed through my head.

However, because the fox-masked man had already made contact with me, I wouldn't be able to carry anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks with me. Especially when it comes to Houko-chan. And aside from the fox-masked man, the place I was heading to... no, the place doesn't matter.

The *man* that I was about to meet...

He's too dangerous.

I can't let anyone else meet him.

It's not like I'm going to meet him because I want to, either. It's just something that can't be helped, that's what I told myself.

Moving forward is hell, retreating is hell too.

A tiger at the front gate and a wolf at the back gate.

Will it be a demon or a snake?

Well, something like that.

".....This is my first time coming to Kyushu, though."

Getting off at the Hakata Station, I couldn't help but look around. Although the words "country bumpkin" weren't really fitting in this case, it still felt like a novelty. I don't often go outside of the Kinki region. At most, when I went to the Aichi Prefecture in July.

Though I've been around Kyoto quite a lot this year.

From Wet Crow's Feather Island to Sumiyuri Academy.

".....Sumiyuri Academy, huh....."

Hanging high school.

Origami Noa, Hagihara Shiogi, Saijou Tamamo, Yukariki ichihime.

June.

And.

September.

Meaning, in other words, the numbers six and nine.....

Well, I don't like to travel in the first place.

I end up thinking of unnecessary stuff.

I end up indulging in unnecessary memories.

Especially when inside a moving train, it's like a place to think about unnecessary stuff and remember unnecessary memories. In a way, I was envious of Houko-chan who always falls asleep when she's in a vehicle because I'm the type that can't fall asleep when around other people.

Well, with the situation being the way it was this time, not having the time to devote to such extra thoughts was a blessing in disguise.

I took the bus from Hakata Station.

I brought a compass just in case, but it's dangerous to walk around in an unknown place and I was already short on time to begin with, so I decided to rely on the transportation services.

An unknown territory.....

To begin with, when you're in a place for the first time, even if you hear the address, it doesn't really make sense to you until you actually go there and I wasn't able to do any preliminary research at all because of Hikari-san and Houko-chan.

The only thing I could rely on was a single note.

Written on it was just the address.

"....Good grief."

I'm not very good at physical activity.

That's why I'm bad at traveling.

I'd like to just sit in an armchair and knit carefreely but that's just not going to happen.

Fukuoka.

I didn't get what he was talking about at first. He said that it was *a certain man*, but I didn't have any idea who it was. The only thing that comes to mind at the mention of "Kyushu" are the Ichigai and the Sanzaka who serve under the Kunagisa Syndicate, but I don't have any connection to them. Even if I went back in memory to six years ago, it's still the same.

But Saitou Takashi.

He said it was a hint.

And the *Thirteen Stairs*.

The end of the world.

Researching a way to not die.

When all of that data is gathered, there was indeed one and only one person that comes to mind.

A guess.

Or I guess it'd be two rather than one.

That too is nonsense, however.

"....."

It was around the beginning of September when the Great Thief, Ishimaru Kouta, came to visit my hospital room.

She was dressed in almost the same way as that figure I saw in July.

Long hair braided on both sides. A hunting cap and a denim coat. Denim pants and lace-up boots.

However, she didn't wear glasses.

It seems that her eyes aren't actually that bad.

Since the turmoil in the *Mad Demon*, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou's, research facility, I had met her several times through Aikawa-san, but honestly, we weren't close enough that she'd come and visit me in the hospital. Of course, Kouta-san didn't come because she was worried about my health.

"Aren't you searching for Aikawa Jun?"

It was the usual sing-song voice.

It's still clear in my memory.

"She is currently missing. Were you aware, dear friend?"

"Do you have some business with Aikawa-san, Kouta-san.....? But..." I answered nervously." If Kouta-san can't find something then there's no way I can, right? There's no way I'd know something that Kouta-san doesn't, right?"

".....You are as consummate as ever, dear friend."

Kouta-san seemed to be having fun. At the very least she didn't seem to be tense or serious. From that point of view, this person had an element similar to Aikawa Jun.

But, well, there were some differences.

Aikawa-san has a bad personality,

but Ishimaru Kouta is ill-natured.

Ultimately, the difference is quite large.

Depending on how you interact with them, it'll leave an impression later on.

"Missing... since when?"

"Weren't you aware, dear friend? In the back world it's a pretty famous story. Aikawa Jun and Izumu the *Man Eater*, of the *Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic*, killed each other at Kiyomizu Temple. It ended with them *striking each other at the same time*. Didn't you know?"

"Striking each other……?"

I raised my body at those words.

I was a little confused.

Part of me also felt that I was careless.

In the first place, it was me who set up the battle between Izumu-kun and Aikawa-san. I'm not shameless enough to say that I wasn't responsible.

"I thought that you'd know about this. What do you think, dear friend? If you do know something, would you tell me?"

"Unfortunately, as you've just heard, this is the first time I've heard that fact. Umm, then... Aikawa-san, Izumu-ku-that *Niounomiya* person might have killed Aikawa-san?"

That's not the case is what I thought.

It's because I thought that there was no way Aikawa-san would lose that I told Izumu-kun about Aikawa-san. I guess I underestimated him.

That's right, Izumu-kun isn't an amateur either.

Abandoning all possible *weaknesses* and focusing them on a single point. That existence that specialized only in *strength*... should I have thought more deeply about the possibility of him approaching the *strongest*?

No, it's not that.

In the first place, my responsibility wasn't just setting the stage for those two. I dragged Izumu-kun out of the secluded

life that he intended to enter into and on top of that, I put him up against Aikawa-san.

If Aikawa-san died because of that...

I wouldn't be able to face anyone.

That's also when it comes to Hime-chan.

I was suddenly nervous.

I clenched my fists tightly.

But.

Kouta-san said, "ridiculous," and curved her lips.

"There's no way Aikawa Jun would die."

"....."

"That's nothing more than a baseless rumor. That that person would die without my permission... it's impossible. Because that person is the only one in the world that I recognize as my rival."

".....Those words sound a lot like trust."

"I really hate that person. To avoid any misunderstandings, let me just say this....." Kouta-san hid her eyes under her hunting cap. "It's just that she's the only person who can balance me out. Even though I hate her, I would be troubled if she disappeared. Otherwise, it would not be consummate."

"....Is that so?"

"Well, if you don't know, then there's not much to say, dear friend. I wasn't really expecting much to begin with, and besides, I wasn't looking for her seriously either so don't misunderstand. Haphazardly, incidentally, without any reason, I search. That's all. Well then, this wasn't much of a greeting, but I will excuse-"

"Ah, wait....."

"Did you remember something?"

She had a face full of expectations.

I felt a bit guilty.

I mean, I didn't think she was such an honest person.

She's ill-natured, but she's not a bad person.

"I, uh... have something I need to talk with Aikawa-san

about..... something I failed to tell her, so if Kouta-san manages to find Aikawa-san, if you are successful in your search for her, could you tell her to contact me?"

Since then.

More than twenty days have passed, but I haven't heard from Kouta-san, let alone from Aikawa-san. I don't know if she's given up or simply hasn't found her yet, but anyway, if it's impossible for Kouta-san, then probably no one can find her. As Kunagisa herself said, it'd be impossible even for her, and even for *Chii-kun*. And of course, for me too.

I had a strange conviction.

That the one who will find Aikawa Jun will be Kouta-san.

"……That being said."

It's unreasonable to rely on someone who's not here.

To be honest, it's not like I want to dump everything concerning Saitou Takashi, that fox-masked man, on that contractor, but I'm still hoping that Humanity's Strongest will come and crush Humanity's Worst before things get worse.

However.

I can't just wait for that to happen.

In the first place, I was the one who chose to keep that fox-masked man a secret from Aikawa-san even though I had an opportunity to tell her. It was a decision I now regret, but at the time, I was afraid of getting involved with him.

I'm still afraid.

I don't want to get any more scared.

That's why I came all the way to Fukuoka.

This stay-at-home Nonsense User.

Without even being asked by anyone, voluntarily.

"I wonder if this is growth.....?"

Or perhaps degeneracy.

Well, either one is fine.

Come to think of it, Hime-chan's *master*, Shisei Yuma's birthplace was Fukuoka. It's a place that I could have come to with Hime-chan, but this isn't the time to think of such things.

There's no way it is.

I got off the bus near my destination and walked from there. As someone who lives in Kyoto, I use the names of streets as landmarks, but since they weren't laid out in grid here it didn't work as well as it did in Kyoto.

This is bad. If I end up wasting too much time here, I won't be able to get back to my apartment today. If things go poorly, Hikari-san and Houko-chan might catch up with me. I don't think that they'd chase after me all the way to Kyushu at any cost, but since it's those two, I was still a bit concerned.

"……I'm beat……"

While saying that.

I got a bit lost, but somehow, I managed to reach my destination before the sun went down. I was able to reach the address written on the note.

It was an old apartment.

No, more than just old, it was dirty.

Not damaged, but dirty.

Rather than the floor creaking, the floor seemed to sink.

The narrow hallways were overflowing with old magazines and garbage bags and on closer inspection, there were more than a few flies and other insects.

How should I put it, it's like the pollution was vivid.

It wasn't decaying, it was rotting.

It smelled worse than it looked and the atmosphere was unapproachable.

I don't live in a proper apartment myself, so I can't really talk, but this is just too awful. It wasn't funny. No one has probably cleaned this place for quite some time. It was at this moment that I was really glad I didn't bring Hikari-san with me.

Umm.

Do people actually live in a place like this……?

This was more of a ruin than a residence.

But no matter how many times I checked the address, no

matter how many times I repeated it, the result was the same. Well, that's right, hesitating after coming this far won't get me anywhere.

It can't be helped.

Let's resolve ourselves.

Since my objective was on the second floor, I climbed up the metal staircase installed outside the building. Some of the stairs were rusty and warped and they creaked when I stepped on them, making me fearful. Do the residents of this apartment live in constant fear of this sword of Damocles? Though, to use that metaphor, this apartment is far from prosperous.....

While avoiding poly buckets and a washing machine that may or may not work, I reached the room I aimed for. Room number five... well, since that's room number four, it's probably just the next one... so this room?

The door hinges of room four were broken and it was clearly unoccupied, but the door of room five looked sturdy in it's own way. The front of the room too... well, compared to the others, it was somewhat cleaner.

At the very least, it seemed like someone was living here.

There was no nameplate.

.....No intercom.

I once again resolved myself.

Thinking about it, it finally occurred to me that since I knew this room's phone number, I could have made an appointment beforehand, but that would be impossible now and pointless in the first place.

If he's not here, then it's fine.

To the point it may be better if he's not here.

Please don't be here.

Here.

If I were to meet *him* here, it would be something like proof. The Story would accelerate too much.

It'd practically be an affirmation of the Story.

It's too good to be true to be a coincidence.

Or maybe that's what the fox-masked man is after.

Giving a hint to his *enemy*.

Giving a handicap to his *enemy*.

I don't think he's that good of a person.

The reason for the worst.

The cause of the worst.

"....."

But.

Still, I have to meet *him*. Even if I'm dancing in the palm of the fox-masked man's hand.

Whether it's Back Nozzle.

Whether it's Jail Alternative.

I don't care.

I knocked.

"....What are you doing acting so suspicious in front of somebody's room?"

But I missed.

The door suddenly opened.

Since I intended to knock with force, I fell forward a little and nearly hit the person who opened the door.

Nearly.

It was a close call.

A head-on collision would have been fatal.

"Huh? You..."

"......Hey."

He was wearing thin leather pants while his upper body was naked.

A thin, white body where the bones could be seen.

But it didn't seem elegant at all.

Bare feet.

His small stature made him look like a middle schooler.

His arms were unnaturally long for such a small height.

His hair had changed since the last time I saw him. Before he had long hair that reached his hips, but now, like Houko-chan, he now had a bob cut that reached the shoulders. He used his glasses as a headband to keep his bangs raised.

"Hmmm...."

He.

After catching sight of me, he moved slowly, right, left, right, as if he were crossing a crosswalk, he checked his surroundings.

Then, seeming to be calm, he smiled wickedly.

"If you're here to kill me, don't you think you're missing about six billion people, Onii-san?"

"……..I guess you're right."

"Come in. I'll at least make you some tea."

Saying that.

Niounomiya Izumu invited me in.

Not just the hallway, but the inside of the room was surprisingly tidy. It seems that Izumu-kun is quite a neat freak, though not as much as Hikari-san. The trash was gathered up in one spot and the old magazines were neatly wrapped together with string.

Six tatami, plus a simple kitchen, a shower, and a toilet. Hmm. It seems that at least in this room, the conditions are better than in the apartment where I live.

A CD radio-cassette player, a 14-inch TV, a pipe bed (with a storage box underneath), a small desk with stationery and a lamp on it. And yet, there were still books spread around haphazardly on the tatami mats. It was kind of like the room of a college student one year after living on his own. At the very least, it was neither the room of a professional killer nor of a great detective.

.....

No, well.

A former professional killer and a former great detective I should say.

The Niounomiya siblings.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

One as a pair, a pair as one.

One is a pair, a pair is one.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

Siblings.

That however, isn't really an accurate description.

He and *she* share the same body.

A double personality, that's what it's called.

The *little sister*, Niounomiya Rizumu.

The *big brother*, Niounomiya Izumu.

They spend their time in a closed time.

They spend their time in a closed space.

There is no name for their body.

There are two names for their mind.

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

However, their role is singular.

A professional killer.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

Niounomiya Rizumu is in charge of investigating.

Niounomiya Izumu carries out the massacre.

Niounomiya Rizumu is in charge of the *weakness*,

Niounomiya Izumu carries out the *strength*.

Two extremes.

This is the insanity of polarizing the *weakness* and the *strength* that should originally have been two sides of the same coin into a ridiculously simple dualism and even personalizing them.

Two personalities.

A big brother and a little sister.

Siblings.

You could call them a monster.

This *professional killer*, the Niounomiya siblings.

Had their head cut off and their heart gouged out.

And yet, even after receiving that much damage, they were still alive.

Leaving a body.

Leaving a personality.

It's not a metaphor, it's a fact.

Even though they were beheaded.

Even though their heart was ripped out.

They still survived in the end

That’s not all. It would be fine if that’s all it was, but that's not all, Niounomiya Izumu **clashed with** Humanity's Strongest Contractor, the *Death Colored Crimson*, Aikawa Jun.

And is still living.

Still living.

Just living.

Even if you kill him, he doesn't die.

Kill, kill, kill, kill, but he doesn't die.

Even if he is killed, he doesn't die.

Even if he is killed over and over and over again, he doesn't die.

It’s just like immortality.

It’s a big departure from the fox-masked man’s and Assistant Professor Kigamine’s *research into not dying*, it's more of a monster-like immortality, but it’s still immortality.

The fact that something like that was right in front of me.

That something like that exists.

That alone made me shiver.

"Oh, since I ran out of tea leaves, I prepared coffee. Onii-san, you seem to be the kind of person that likes it black, but do you put in cream at least?"

"No, completely black."

"Hyaa. So cooool."

Saying that, Izumu-kun came around to my front with two cups in his hand. He handed me the cup in his left hand with a "here" and then sat on the duvet of the pipe bed. He took a pillow and threw it near me. It seemed to mean that I should use it as a seating cushion.

".....Izumu-kun. Listen, I’m having trouble figuring out where I should look, so can you put on a shirt or something?"

This situation, in which a girl of that age is half naked in front of you, might be quite a happy one depending on the circumstances, but considering future developments, it just made things harder to deal with. Besides, it’s only the body that’s *a girl of that age* and the personality manifested within is an eighteen year old man, even more so it’s an eighteen year old professional killer.

"You pervert. Where are you looking?"

"It’s hard not to look in this situation."

"I did all of the laundry just now. It hasn't dried yet."

"Try doing your laundry with a bit more planning next

time."

"Before, Rizumu used to take care of all that..." Izumu scratched his head in an extremely irritated way. "Then, Onii-san, let me borrow your shirt."

"Then I'd be the half naked one this time."

"Onii-san is a man both physically and mentally, so it doesn't matter."

"That's true, but....."

I wasn't too comfortable with that idea.

But since there didn't seem to be any other way, I took off my shirt and gave it to Izumu-kun. "Uwaa. It's all lukewarm and gross," he complained while putting it on.

"Since Onii-san lives in Kyoto, you probably don't know, but Kyushu is pretty hot, you know? At least let me be naked in my room."

"In your case, it looks like you'd even go out in that state so it's scary. You opened your door without any concern earlier."

"But I was wearing pants, right? Leave me alone, I can't sleep unless I'm naked."

"You were sleeping? During the day?"

"I'd prefer it if you stayed out of other people's lifestyles."

"I guess. But, well, I didn't really come here to talk about that in the first place."

"Hmm... but you did great in finding this place. Did you ask Mr. Fox?"

"Not exactly. I've known about this address for a long time because Rizumu-chan had given me her business card."

It's from when we first met.

When Kasugai-san picked her up she took out a business card from her wallet in order to confirm her identity and found her address and phone number written on it along with her title of *Great Detective*. More precisely, the card was lost, but Kasugai-san has a good memory so she memorized it.

That was the address written on the note.

The address. The postal code and the address were

completely unknown to me, but yesterday, when the fox-masked man told me "Fukuoka,"when I thought about all of the information, that address immediately came to mind.

I went back to my apartment to check and bingo.

At the very least, I didn't have any other lead.

However, it's not like I wasn't worried. Given the **flow of the Story**, it was almost certain that I'd meet Izumu-kun here, but before, I had been told once by the fox-masked man last month that "that address is a fake" and "even if you go there you won't find anything."

Well, that part can be explained.

At that point, Izumu had decided to retire.

He decided to enter into seclusion.

The fox-masked man didn't want to get in the way of that.

He didn't want me to be a hindrance.

So he made sure that I wouldn't visit that address.

Izumu-kun's... no.

In this case is it rather Rizumu-chan's?

Whichever it is, the fox-masked man.

Accepted the Niounomiya siblings' will.

Accepted their will and chose to be silent.

However that was **at that point.**

At the current point.

He made things progress and let me meet Izumu-kun.

Without caring about the Niounomiya siblings' will.

He tried to make the Story progress to his convenience.

He made the Story accelerate.

If you asked him about it, he'd probably tell you that it's "all the same either way," or something like that.

You can't even call it a whim.

This is also Back Nozzle, huh.

"But, that being said, it's a wonder... for Izumu-kun, who should have gone missing after that battle with Aikawa-san, to be living normally at the address written on the business card. I wouldn't have considered it."

"Hmm. So you can't accept that I just went to Fukuoka? Then let me ask you something, Onii-san, did you receive that business card directly from Rizumu?"

"Ah, no....."

That reminds me.

Kasugai-san took the liberty of pulling it out while Rizumu-chan was unconscious.

"We don't publicize this address, you know. Basically Rizumu was simply holding on to that business card. There's no way that she would do even a single thing that could disadvantage me."

"........Right."

Niounomiya Rizumu, the puppet.

It sounds fine when you say that it's a double personality.

But in reality, she's just Izumu-kun's proxy.

"How do you think Aikawa Jun was able to call me out in the first place?"

"That's... using a secret route only known to contractors....."

I thought she just relied on *Chii-kun*.

Well, it makes sense, I guess.

"But if you truly intended to hide, if you say that you've already retired, then I think you should have moved out of this place because Rizumu-chan is no longer here."

Right.

Niounomiya Rizumu is no more.

Niounomiya Rizumu's personality disappeared.

Niounomiya Rizumu is dead.

Now.

There's just one personality within the body of the girl in front of me.

Just Niounomiya Izumu.

"That's what I thought too, but..."

Izumu-kun looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"**I had a feeling you'd come visit me one day.**"

"....."

"It's a joke, don't be so serious."

"I'm not."

Thinking about it calmly, those kinds of cover up operations and the manipulation of information were all undertaken by Rizumu-chan, the personality of *weakness*. *Hiding oneself* is something far removed from Izumu-kun's field of expertise.

That's all there is to it.

I don't have the time for frivolous conversation.

Don't get serious.

Don't get irritated.

I just need to face him honestly.

"Aikawa-san..."

I asked.

"What happened to Aikawa-san? From the rest of the world's point of view, it seems that you and Aikawa-san defeated each other at the same time."

"Defeated each other? Ha. Defeated each other, huh."

Izumu-kun laughed with self-deprecation.

"Well, as you can see... most of my hair was lost. I thought it was a good match, but, well, there wasn't a clear conclusion, so it was a draw, I guess....."

"That's pretty vague coming from you."

"It's a bit vague, well, because it was a half-assed match."

"Half-assed?"

"I carelessly, unintentionally, inadvertently let my mouth go loose."

"Izumu-kun is pretty talkative." I nodded. "So what did you say?"

"About Mr. Fox."

Izumu-kun said.

"As expected, I should say... she understood in an instant, that woman. **That it was her father**....."

"....And then?"

"Who knows. That's why it was half-assed. I was

desperately trying not to die, so before I knew it the main stage of Kiyomizu temple was completely destroyed. Well, most of it was probably from my *Eating One*, but I was covered in pieces of hinoki cypress and on the ground, looking up at the sky, and Aikawa Jun had disappeared."

"Disappeared....."

"She was nowhere. Not a trace, not even a corpse."

Then at the very least, that means Aikawa-san wasn't killed by Izumu-kun.

That was good news.

I must tell it to Kouta-san.

Of course, the question remains as to why Aikawa-san couldn't be found after that, but still, we've made a lot of progress on this case. That alone made it worth coming all the way to Kyushu.

And.....

Without even me needing to tell her,

Aikawa-san learned about the existence of the fox-masked man.

She learned about her father's existence.

.....

Then is that related to why she erased her presence?

To think that it's not would be absurd.

"Mm? What's up?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm happy **that you were able to lose without getting injured**, Izumu-kun."

"I didn't lose. I said it was a tie," Izumu-kun complained. "But after that, to think that she went missing. I wonder where she is and what she's doing, that strongest one."

"Do you intend to get revenge?"

"No, it's fine now. I know when to quit."

"I know that very well."

"It bothers me what she's doing, though. Because I might be a bit responsible."

"Mr. Fox... she learned about the existence of her father,

right? Aikawa-san. If that's the case, then it should be easy to guess"

"Father, huh... gyahaha, I don't really get that kind of thing."

"Speaking of which, Izumu-kun, what about your parents?"

"I don't have any."

Izumu-kun laughed cynically.

"All I had was just a *little sister*. And even that is now gone. The price of fighting the strongest, I guess"

"Dual personalities, huh....."

"She was my precious *little sister*... what about you? Do you understand that strongest's feelings? Do you have parents or something like that?"

"I do. I also had a little sister."

"Had? Past tense, huh. Same as me."

"Well yeah. Also the expression "I had" doesn't really fit in this case. Unlike you two, Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan, we shared very little time together."

"Huh?"

"When I was so young that I couldn't even remember words, she was kidnapped. I grew up without knowing that fact."

"Kidnapped....." Izumu-kun was slightly surprised. "Now that I think about it, Mr. Fox's big sister was also kidnapped. So? What happened? Did you find her after that?"

"Rather than finding her, I was living right next to her, unexpectedly. It wasn't until I turned ten that I realized that she was my sister."

"That's quite complicated."

"It is complicated. Though it seems everyone knew about it except me."

Just the same as back then, I've been living my life outside of the loop.

I've been conceited from then on.

"She died in a plane crash shortly thereafter, so the time we

spent together as brother and sister was a very, very short amount of time."

"Hmm. What a cool past," Izumu-kun interjected, sounding as if he had lost interest. "By the way, did you ever find the culprit who kidnapped your sister?"

"The Kunagisa Syndicate."

I answered as if it was nothing.

"Hmm." Izumu-kun nodded.

He probably thought it was a common story.

Well, it isn't an uncommon one.

It's not a weird or bizarre tale.

It's normal.

To the extent that it's not enough to be called a story.

It's not something cool.

It's a normal story.

A story from long ago.

I don't really think much about it now.

Six years ago.

I only thought about it somewhat.

"……So? You're not going to tell me that you came here just because you're worried about what happened to Aikawa Jun, right? It would take me three whole days to travel from Kyoto to Fukuoka, even if I were to run."

"No, I used the tools of civilization……"

What about the sea in between?

Do you swim?

"Yeah. Well, I wanted to ask about Aikawa-san, but I have more important things to discuss. There's something I want you to tell me, Izumu-kun."

"Something you want me to tell you? What is it?"

"Everything."

I took out the envelope.

The envelope handed directly to me by the fox-masked man.

The seal was already broken.

I already finished checking it's contents.

Instead of picking up the envelope placed on the tatami mat, with a very irritated expression on his face Izumu-kun murmured, "I see....."

"So that's the situation."

"....."

"You became Mr. Fox's enemy."

".....Well, yes."

"You did, huh. I'm not sure what you're thinking, Mr. Fox. Onii-san and Zerozaki Hitoshiki are completely different, aren't they?"

Izumu-kun looked really irritated.

.....Hmm?

Just now, it sounded as if he knew about Zerozaki. No, I'm pretty sure we've had this conversation before.

Ah, wrong, wrong.

It was Niounomiya Izumu who had informed the fox-masked man about Zerozaki's existence in the first place. If that's the case, then it's only natural that he knows about him.....

However, something is.....

Completely different?

Completely unalike?

".....So, what's the situation?"

"It's not really a situation. Now that every member of the *Thirteen Stairs* is present, he wants to hold a party....."

"Oh. He gathered them, the *Thirteen Stairs*. I thought it was something forever impossible. Mr. Fox found his *enemy*, so he scrambled to gather them in a hurry. Hmm. Without me or Rizumu, I wonder what kind of members he got. I'm somewhat curious."

"....."

"So that's the *everything* you want me to tell you, but, Onii-san."

In an instant.

Niounomiya Izumu's arms stretched.

No, they didn't stretch, but it felt like that.

His right hand that should have been holding his coffee cup.

Was gripping my face.

With his fingers completely spread and wrapping around.

The thumb on my right cheek.

The little finger on my left cheek.

The three remaining on my forehead.

Firmly gripping.

Fixed.

"...Did it ever occur to you that if you came to me asking something like that, I'd kill you?"

"....."

"Despite being removed, I was also one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, you know?"

".....I know."

"Then you have the nerve to come to me in Kyushu, the place that was once called the end of purgatory, to meet. The reason, let's hear it. If you have such a delusion of importance.

"......Now that Rizumu-chan is gone, I thought you'd have no reason to follow Mr. Fox."

"That's lacking... even though I retired, I'm still a *professional killer*. The difficulty of staying alive when in front of me, I should've taught that to your body, or have you already forgotten?"

"....."

"Did you think it'd be fine if you died?"

"I don't want to die."

"Then why?"

"Because if I were to be killed here, that would mean a denial of the Story. The one who told me to come here was that fox-masked man himself. So getting me killed here would be a denial of his philosophy, it would deny Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative. If it's like that, then I could deny what he calls the Story. I could give him a blow. Either way, it's not bad."

"……That's a good answer."

Saying that.

Izumu-kun didn't relax the power in his right hand.

Rather, he tightened his grip a bit.

Huh……

Seriously, what the hell?

Did I read it wrong……?

"Th-there's one more reason."

"What. Try to say it."

"Because I love Izumu-kun."

"……"

Squash!

My skull was crushed.

That was not the case, what was crushed was the coffee cup that was in his left hand before I knew it.

Then.

Izumu-kun released me from his right hand.

"……A place to stay. Did you find one?"

"No. I intend to go home today."

"Then stay here tonight… it'll be a really long story so get ready. Don't think you'll be able to go to the bathroom midway."

"……Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. I simply…"

Izumu-kun took the envelope on top of the tatami.

"Wanted to scare you."

"……"

"If after you've heard everything, you can still have an unconcerned look on your face without even closing your eyes as you're about to get killed, I'll kiss you on the cheek, Onii-san."

Kajou Akira.
Ichirizuka Konomi.
Emoto Sonoki.
Utage Kudan.
Furuyari Zukin.
Tokinomiya Jikoku.
Migishita Rurero.
Yamiguchi Nureginu.
Miotsukushi Misora.
Miotsukushi Takami.
Noise.
Kino Raichi.

"Hmm...?"

Izumu-kun.

After looking at the document from the envelope, he tilted his head.

"…….There's only twelve of them, aren't there?"

"Yeah."

"Mr. Fox said that he gathered every member, right?"

"Yeah."

"What does it mean?"

"Well, I've thought about it, but probably the *Thirteen Stairs* is not necessarily an organization composed of thirteen members. That guy, he said that 'everyone is here,' but he never once said anything like 'the thirteen of us are here.'"

"I mean, sure I haven't heard how many people he intended to gather, I assumed it'd naturally be thirteen, but if the *Thirteen Stairs* are only twelve people, it doesn't really sit well."

"Is that so? If it's that fox-masked man, he'd probably say something like 'whether there are thirteen or twelve people, it's

all the same.'"

"That's true."

"Or maybe he intended to gather thirteen, but then decided that twelve was enough. The number also becomes thirteen with Mr. Fox included."

"I see. That seems possible."

Seemingly convinced, Izumu-kun turned his attention back to the document.

With a hmmm, he nodded a few times.

As I expected, he was somewhat interested.

It was an organization he was a part of originally.

Not just him alone, but also with his sister.

"The time... the night of September 30th... the place... what? The ruins of Sumiyuri Academy?"

"Yes."

I nodded.

"It's a place with many connections, you see."

"……..Do you intend to go?"

"For now," I nodded. "If I don't, it seems like this won't end anytime soon."

"End, huh……."

"But if I'm going to this place, I'll need to know what I'm walking into. I'm not suicidal."

"Hmm... but," Izumu looked back several times at the document as if something bothered him. Since the furigana was written clearly, I don't think it's a problem of him not being able to read the kanji. "...Anyway, I've met a few of these guys."

"A few, is it?"

"When Rizumu and I were there, there were only six of us. Four excluding me and Rizumu. Amongst them there's one that I haven't met, but I know the other three."

"Three……"

So he only knows three.

That's a slightly disappointing fact.

But even then, I can't rely on Kunagisa for this. I still don't

have the ability to think that *it's fine to involve her*.

But.....

"No, don't worry. There's only three that I've met, but the other nine are all famous people. As expected of Mr. Fox, he didn't neglect to keep an eye on *the whole world*. Though, there's a few people that I'm unable to stomach mixed in there."

"People you're unable to stomach.....?"

"Yeah. A few names that this *Man Eater* can't stomach, but, well, it's fine. So, Onii-san, who do you want to hear about first?"

"Even if you ask that, since I don't know any of them at all, for now, I would be grateful if you could tell me about them in order."

"In order, huh. Then first..."

Izumu-kun spread the letter out on the tatami mat so that the both of us could see it.

"...This guy. Kajou Akira."

"Yes."

"Even if you say that you don't know any of them, you must know him at least, right? He's a colleague of Mr. Fox that went with him to America."

The fox-masked man's colleague.

Aikawa Junya.

Kajou Akira.

"He should be dead, though."

Ten years ago.

Just like the other two and their daughter.

"He's alive, that's what Mr. Fox said. If he died, then Mr. Fox and even the strongest would be too. Even then, I've never met him. He's one of the four. The first step of *Thirteen Stairs*."

"....."

"Well, as far as this guy is concerned, Onii-san, I don't think you need to be careful of him. It seems this guy has yet to return from America."

".....Is that so?"

"He's what you'd call a special ambassador," Izumu-kun said. "He's also called the *Second*. Mr. Fox is the *First* and the other guy was the *Third*. It's probably a nickname from long ago."

"*Second*, huh....."

Kajou Akira.

When I did my research on Saitou Takashi, I looked into the man to see if I could trace it back to him, but I didn't find anything.

He was completely unknown.

"He's the only guy in the *Thirteen Stairs* who's on equal footing with Mr. Fox. Well, to be honest, I doubt it. Even whether he exists or not. The only one who said he was alive was Mr. Fox. From that standpoint, he's different from Mr. Fox or the strongest."

"I see....."

"Well, in that sense, even if he's worthy of fear, he's not worth being careful of. He's like a ghost. No matter how scary he is, he can't harm you. So next is the second one. Ichirizuka Konomi."

"Judging by the name, I assume it's a girl."

"Right. The second step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, the *Space Creator*. She has no combat abilities, but she's a rare type of ESP user that creates *places*. I didn't like this one and I heard she didn't like me either."

"Creates *places*....."

"There's this thing called an advantageous position, right? Fighting somewhere you're familiar with is an advantage for anyone, but the opposite is also true. In other words, it's an ability useful for when you want to divide and conquer the enemy."

"Have you met her?"

"I and Rizumu were the third and fourth step. Though that was when we retired. When we entered the *Thirteen Stairs*, we

were the seventh and eighth step. It was a system where you progress by reducing your number. The alternation of people was quite intense."

"Hmm... but the fact that this Ichirizuka Konomi is the second step means....."

"Yeah. She's one of the three I've met. She looks like a very serious and sophisticated woman who reads poetry at the library, but her personality is pretty nasty. On top of that, she worships Mr. Fox from the bottom of her heart."

"Worships?"

"What you'd call head over heels."

"Hmm....."

If that's the case, then it's a bother that she's a girl.

The fox-masked man... he looks like he's someone who's popular.

"The third step, Emoto Sonoki. The person who was promoted after I left. When I was there, they were the fifth step."

"That means he's an old acquaintance."

"Judging by the name, this person is a guy," I said to Izumu-kun. Izumu-kun said "yeah" and nodded.

"He's a doctor."

"Doctor?"

"The medic within the *Thirteen Stairs*, I guess. He's the same as Konomi, he doesn't have any ability to hurt others. I mean, when I was there, it was enough with just me carrying out that role since I counted for twelve people, but, well, I was in his care quite a bit. Mr. Fox called him *Physician* or *Doctor*."

"Doctor, huh....."

"He wears a lab coat like it's loungewear, so he really gives off that doctor impression. And he's, well, I don't know... unlike Konomi, it's not like he's worshipping Mr. Fox."

"Is that so?"

"You can at least imagine that it's not a monolith, right? With the leader of the group, Mr. Fox, being like the incarnation

of whim."

"That may be right, but....."

"The Doctor's a guy whose purpose is to heal the wounded. No, more than just a purpose, it's his life's work, I guess. He's a bit like me, actually, though our vectors are opposite."

"So if you're around Mr. Fox, you won't be troubled with injured people."

"That's how it is."

"".....I'm beaten. It's only the third one and I'm already quite sick of it."

Also... Emoto, huh?

It's not like with Aikawa-san and Aikawa Junya, but since this surname's reading overlaps with another surname I know, it makes it hard to deal with. Well, I guess I can't really be bothered by such things. Surnames overlapping is probably not that rare.

"So, the fourth step... this Utage person? With that I can't really tell if they're a man or a woman, but it's the last of the three you've met, right?"

"That's right."

However, Izumu-kun seemed somewhat indecisive.

His expression was vague.

"But this Utage Kudan... I've known him for a long time and I've talked to him quite a few times, but he's a guy I just can't get a grip on. Just from what I know, he's been demoted twice by Mr. Fox. Despite that, it doesn't seem like he has any special power. I can't understand at all what he's thinking... he was called *Imaginary Weapon*." (TL : sounds the same as nuclear weapon)

"Nuclear... eh?"

"*Imaginary Weapon*. It's a play on words by Mr. Fox. It means that it's a guy that you can't tell whether he's here or not. It seems that Mr. Fox wanted to gather people *like that*."

"People like that?"

"*Weird people*. For Mr. Fox, what kind of ability the person

has doesn't really matter. Whether it is a *professional killer* or a *doctor*, it was all the same. *Weird people*. The kind of weird people that seem able to **take part in the Story**. In other words, Utage was probably originally a candidate to be a *future enemy*. In that sense, he might be an existence of the same type as you, that Utage Kudan. His appearance too, he doesn't have any special characteristics."

"....."

Somehow, it feels like a mixture of both good and bad.....

The same type as me, huh.....

Obviously, he's probably not exactly the same as me.

There's no one who's the same as me.

Even if there were, there's only one at most.

"Then from the fifth step onwards, as I said earlier, I've never met them. From this point on, they're the eight that Mr. Fox gathered after I left, with the image of the battle with you completely in mind. It's because they recognize you as the *enemy*, and because the *enemy* exists, that they are members of this group. Except for one, all of them have names I recognize."

"Huh....."

"I don't know all of the details from here on out, so I'm doing it in one go. The fifth step, Furuyari Zukin, *Swordsmith*. The sixth step, Tokinomiya Jikoku, *Thought Manipulator*. The seventh step, Migishita Rurero, *Puppeteer*."

Swordsmith, thought manipulator, puppeteer.

Hmm. It's starting to look a little more like an organization.

"Setting swordsmith and puppeteer aside, you don't hear the words thought manipulator that often."

"Well, it's close to hypnosis. The *Niounomiya* who created me and Rizumu, the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe's opposite... of the opposite... of the opposite... the Tokinomiya. Gyahaha, when I was around, I never would've been able to be allies with those guys."

"Why?"

"Because that's what I was trained to do. Every time I saw

someone from the Tokinomiya, I mowed them down without exception. Gyahaha, that one would join the moment I leave, Mr. Fox really is calculating."

"Was that one of the people you didn't like?"

"Kinda. No, the people I hate even more are the three after that."

Izumu-kun smiled broadly.

But his eyes weren't smiling.

What is it... is he mad?

About the selection of the people who filled in the gap he left.

...Though that's probably too selfish.

"Those three are probably for me and Rizumu... no, well, I guess only for me. Those three were probably prepared as my substitute. I really was sold cheaply, to think that I could be replaced with just those three..."

"....."

"Yamiguchi Nureginu, *Assassin*. Then Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, *Professional killers*."

"Professional killers? Huh....."

"These guys, the Miotsukushi are an offshoot of the Niounomiya Performing Arts Group. They were originally more like a gathering than an organization, but the Miotsukushi is too much. Couldn't he have at least prepared a Sawarabi... wait, ah, Zerozaki Hitoshiki crushed them, didn't he? I forgot. Even then, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami... when these two are together they finally become a full fledged combination, but putting them on par with Niounomiya siblings is ridiculous. Even if that were the case, they're only the ninth and tenth step. Aaaaah. I'm kinda hurt."

"Do you want me to comfort you?"

"With your life?"

"No, with my burning heart."

"I will humbly refuse."

"I'm deeply disappointed."

What's with this conversation?

I gave myself the comeback.

"Well, for what it's worth, I'll give you an explanation. The two of them are twins. With their unique trait being that they're twins who kill their target as a combination, they are the natural, or rather, the default type of professional killers for the Niounomiya Performing Arts Group."

".....I've heard various people talk about it, but does everyone in the Niounomiya form a team with their brothers and sisters to conduct their job?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

They really are a weird bunch.....

"I was recognized as an exception to that rule, though."

"A double personality isn't exactly siblings, right?"

"That's how it is."

A byproduct was it?

He said some clever things.

"Well, as for the Miotsukushi pair, that's fine. So the name before that... that Yamiguchi Nureginu guy. Izumu-kun, what kind of guy is he? You said he's an *Assassin*, right?

"Hmm. Well, *Assassin* is a pretty tricky way to put it. You, how much knowledge do you have about the *Killing Names*? I don't think I need to explain any more about the Niounomiya, but..."

"Honestly, that world is distant."

Not to say that it's a fairy tale.

Still, it's on the level of a dream.

"Hmm. For me it was everyday life, though. Though, thanks to Rizumu, it may have been better for me than it is for the others. The *Yamiguchi* are the second in rank after the *Niounomiya*. By the way, the Zerozaki are third. However, the most fierce and loathsome ones are the *Zerozaki*, while the *Yamiguchi* are the second most loathsome. One more thing, in regards to who's the most abhorred, it'd be faster to count from

the bottom for the Niounomiya."

"? How does that happen? Umm... these are the *professional killers*, the *assassins*, and the *demonic killers*, right? Setting the *demonic killers* aside, I feel like there's not that much of a difference between *professional killers* and *assassins*, or is that amateurish thinking?"

"No, you've hit a point. At least, one the face of it. However, Onii-san, to begin with, the nicknames like *professional killers* were given to the *Killing Names* pretty haphazardly."

".....Haphazardly?"

"We just needed a sign to distinguish between them. If we go back to your origin, you didn't name yourself, you had other people who named you."

The people who named me, huh.

I wonder who they are.

"But it being haphazardly means....."

"From my subjective point of view, the only names that I think are fitting are the *Niounomiya*'s *professional killer* and the Zerozaki's *demonic killer* and, well, just barely, but the Ishinagi's g*rim reaper*. In particular, the *Yamiguchi*'s *assassin* definitely doesn't fit."

"Yamiguchi... and Ishinagi.

Hmm.....

Even though I understood it, I didn't feel good about my acquaintances sharing the same name with those kinds of people. This time even the kanji were the same. I can't really tell them that they have the same name as those from the *Killing Names*.

"What's your reason for saying they're different?"

"What makes the *Zerozaki* so bad is that they're willing to resort to anything for their own. They have an abnormal sense of comradeship. Did you know that?"

"Hmm....."

"If you don't know, then just say so."

"No, it's not that I don't....."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

.....He didn't seem like the type.

"The *Yamiguchi* have something that's about half the same. They're willing to resort to anything for the master that they choose. An abnormal level of loyalty. Business-like murders based on a master-servant contract. That's their symbol."

"....."

"With no calculations, no plans, no limits, loyalty. They're just killers, what they do is the same. They just carry out the murders that they're ordered to do, so calling them *assassins* is fine, but if you ask me, they're more like soldiers. *Slaughtering soldiers*. Or perhaps like ninjas."

"Ninjas, huh....."

I see.

Thinking about it like that, it's easy to understand.

"Hmm. Even then, a *Niounomiya* being replaced by a *Yamiguchi* by Mr. Fox is pretty insulting. Even the gentle me is a liiiiiiiiiiitle pissed."

"....."

"It's irritating. When Rizumu was here, she was the one in charge of all those annoying things. These slimy things make me agitated from deep inside my body."

"...Yamiguchi Nureginu... what's his defining characteristic?"

In an attempt to distract Izumu-kun's consciousness, I asked for information in the form of a question. It seems I was too thoughtless. It looks like that without Rizumu-chan, Izumu-kun is severely lacking in balance. Even when just holding a normal conversation, it looks like he could burst any moment. Talking about the *Thirteen Stairs* or the fox-masked man seems to be pretty close to the line.

"Nureginu the *Hidden Shadow*, Nureginu the *Concealed*. I've heard a lot about him from rumors, but no one has ever seen him. He never shows himself in front of others. There aren't even any witnesses. In other words, every single person who

has seen him was killed."

".....He's an amazing guy."

He doesn't look like someone who'd feel humiliated when compared to someone else. No, well, maybe if he had a normal person's sensibility, but for someone whose calling is *murder*, I didn't think it was something rude. At the very least, I didn't think that the man the fox-masked man chose to be Izumu-kun's successor was that unfitting.

However Izumu-kun snickered.

"There's no beauty in the Yamiguchi's killing."

"....."

"It's not limited to just the Mizutsukushis, it's the same thing for the whole *Yamiguchi* clan. I don't like their lack of aesthetics. They're just annoying sneaky guys who think that it's fine as long as they complete their job. They don't have any concept of duels or matches, it's really just a job. There is no plan, no strategy. In short, their methods are lame. They are stingy, annoying, and questionable. If you ask me, the Zerozaki clan is still better. Well, Onii-san, be somewhat careful of them. Those guys go for the kill easily."

".....I wonder how Mr. Fox got a guy like that under his control. Does it mean that the master Yamiguchi Nureginu pledged his allegiance to is Mr. Fox?"

"I don't know about that. That may be the case, but Mr. Fox isn't very good at gaining trust from men. He's got charisma, but it's mainly for women."

"Hmm. Even though no one's ever seen him, with a name like Nureginu it's surely not a man. So then... no, it's possible she pledged her allegiance to someone else and that person told her to obey Mr. Fox's orders."

"At any rate, it's Mr. Fox we're talking about here. Getting someone whose appearance has never been seen before to become his ally should be no problem for him."

".....I guess so."

A body expelled from causality.

That's why he needs limbs that can move in his stead, but I feel that using the *Thirteen Stairs* as mere limbs is a bit inadequate.

They're too unwieldy, too much to handle.

Of course, the fox-masked man wouldn't care about such things. I'm sure he'd just repeat that it's all the same.

But two *professional killers* and one *assassin*, huh.

Then it's reasonable to assume that the person who killed Maki-san is one of those three. From that perspective, it could be said that those three have some connection to me.

"Then."

Izumu-kun said with a pause.

"The next one, the eleventh step, I don't know him. Never heard of him either."

"Ah, the one you said you didn't know earlier."

Noise.

That's the only thing written.

It wasn't clear whether this was a surname, a first name, or a title.

Obviously, there wasn't any furigana given either.

Just three katakana.

"I haven't heard of him at all, not even from Mr. Fox. If he decided to add a no name like him, then there were surely other candidates. I really don't get Mr. Fox. That Utage guy is enough for no names, I don't think this is the time to gather even more *weird people*."

"You can't read his intentions, huh....."

"Noise, huh. I don't think it's just to make up the numbers, but is he Rizumu's replacement? An investigator, an information gatherer, it'd make sense now that there is none. You could say that Yamiguchi Nureginu could fulfil that role, but no matter how you look at it, that's not his speciality. Well, maybe he just doesn't need someone like that at this point..."

"Ah, that reminds me, I have a guess."

"A guess?"

"When I received this letter from Mr. Fox, he was with someone that looked suspicious. Someone who was wearing a fancy fox mask and a yukata. We only passed by each other for a moment, so I didn't really see much."

"A yukata and a fox mask...? What's with that clearly imitative guy?"

"They had the stature of a child."

"Hmm. I don't know anyone like that. Well, maybe it's him, but if there was someone like that, it wouldn't have been weird for me to have heard about it. Even if you were to exclude me, I can't really imagine that Rizumu didn't know."

"You're making quite a serious face while you're thinking."

"Huh? Of course, you idiot. In our world, unknown enemies are the scariest things. I don't mean to pretend that it's a war of information, but no one rushes at their enemy with complete ignorance. At the very least, I'm not that kind of idiot. That's also something that Rizumu managed when she was here."

"No, not that," I said. "It's all other people's business now, but you're taking it so seriously."

"....."

Izumu-kun's eyes suddenly opened wide.

After a while, his face became flushed.

He stared at me with his dreadful eyes.

Damn, did I make him angry again?

However, Izumu-kun, without saying anything in particular, returned to his original expression and proceeded to say, "so, the last one," changing the subject in a somewhat forced manner.

I was relieved for the time being.

The last one.

"Kino Raichi, that guy-"

"Ah, it's fine for that person," I interrupted Izumu-kun. "As for Kino-san, I've already broken through."

".....Huh?"

"About ten days ago, he attacked me in the hospital. No, he

just came to give me a letter, but he was fought off by someone who had just come to visit me. If we're talking about making up numbers, I think he would fit more."

"……Kino, you said."

Izumu-kun's eyes widened.

It wasn't the same as just before. This time, he turned pale.

Niounomiya Izumu turned pale.

"You fought with Kino?"

"Eh… ah, well, yes."

"……I intended to tell you this just now, that this Kino guy is the most dangerous amongst the twelve that I know. That you should never get involved with him. That even if you might meet Yamiguchi Nureginu, you should never meet him. I intended to say that to frighten you. Even then, without me saying it… you say that you've already broken through him?"

"Y-yes……."

That threatening attitude made me at a loss for words.

What… what is this exactly?

"He looked like a small fry and ran with his tail between his legs, but… what? Why are you looking at me like I've done something irreparable."

"*Kino* is, you see…" Izumu-kun said while gritting his teeth. "Alongside the *Tokinomiya* that I talked about earlier, he's one of the *Cursing Names*. If you ask me, he's in a group much more dangerous than the *Tokinomiya*."

"……*Cursing Names*?"

"They're the guys I least want to deal with. They're even worse than the *Yamiguchi* or the *Zerozaki*. That's because, while we are a fighting group, they are a non-fighting group. If we are inhumans that are infatuated with *killing*, they're inhumans that are infatuated with *not killing*."

"……I don't see what the problem is."

Kino-san's weakness.

So it was something bound to his name?

But what's the problem with that?

"Don’t you see, they reject all combat. In other words, they win without fighting. And *not killing* just means that they don't dirty their hands, in reality they kill much more than we ever could. We only kill our enemies, but they even kill their allies. So thinking about it simply, they kill twice as much. There’s no way you can be fine after coming into contact with one of the *Cursing Names* and on top of that, you ended up running into a *Kino* of all things... I swear, no matter what, including two of the *Cursing Names* in the *Thirteen Stairs*. I doubt Mr. Fox’s sanity. I can only say that he's crazy."

A name he doesn't like, huh.

However, if that's the case.

At that hospital, Kino-san.

At that time.

Even though I thought we repelled him.

Even though I thought he fled.

"I can even bet..."

Izumu-kun stared at me with a bitter smile.

"You, or that person who visited you in the hospital, one of the two, or maybe both had something done to them."

"Something."

"I mean cursed."

Izumu-kun said, sounding extremely gloomy.

"Looks like I’ll have to postpone the kiss for later."

4

The next morning.
The next morning that started on Izumu-kun's bed.
I got a call on my cell phone from Houko-chan
"Onii-chan."
More than usual,
It was a voice with strong calmness.
"Miiko-san is....."

0

The act of quantifying people turns them into individuals.

1

"Currently she's in a state of reduced activity."

A dark suit and tie.

Raven black hair and a thick hat.

Crossing her long legs and thin arms.

Suzunashi Neon.

She was making a complicated expression on the side of the hospital bed.

As one would expect, she wasn't holding a cigarette.

She never took her eyes off of Miiko-san, who was lying completely unconscious in bed, for even a second. She didn't even try to look at me.

My chest seemed to tighten at that sight.

"……Excuse me."

I pulled up a pipe chair for myself and set it next to Suzunashi-san. Since I was hospitalized here until just a few days ago, and since I have a lot of hospital experience, I knew how to act.

Miiko-san.

Officially, she was in a state where only the staff could see her, but by asking Rabumi I somehow managed to get permission to enter. Only Miiko-san and Suzunashi-san were inside the hospital room.

After receiving the call from Houko-chan, I came back to Kyoto on the bullet train, but Miiko-san was already in the hospital and undergoing some sort of treatment.

I looked at Miiko-san on the bed.

Though it was painful to look at her.

I looked.

It was a beautiful sight.

She didn't have any visible wounds.

She didn't look wounded at all.

However.

She looked very pained.

Her sweat flowed in drops.

Her breathing was erratic.

She looked like she was having a nightmare.

"High fever, difficulty breathing, dizziness, nausea, anemia, low blood pressure, paralysis, confusion. They said she was already unconscious when they brought her to the hospital. That morning, in the apartment, those, uh, what’re those cute kids called again... I was just saying good morning to Houko-chan, Moeta-kun, and the muscular old man, when suddenly she collapsed."

"Suddenly....."

"In reality, they said she had been feeling unwell for some time. I heard it too. Asano is pretty stubborn and she hates hospitals."

"It can’t be helped," Suzunashi said, forcing a bitter smile.

"The cause is unknown. At first the doctors thought it was something like a severe cold, but that wasn't the case. Her body's metabolism... or was it the immune system, was severely compromised. The symptoms are much more serious than they appear on the surface."

"....."

"It’s as if she was cursed."

Suzunashi-san said that.

I clenched my teeth.

It was too late.

No, it's not, if it's too late, then it’s been too late for a long time now. It's not a matter of a day or two, the situation hadn’t changed at all since I was at the apartment this morning.

Kino Raichi.

I learned of his existence too late.

I can only say that I was careless.

I didn't have any words.

I didn't have any words for Suzunashi-san,

And obviously I didn't have any words for Miiko-san either.

What a thing.....

In the end, I had gotten her involved.

"....."

Last night.

Izumu's explanation about Kino-san. No, about one of the non-combatants, the *Cursing Name* Kino, I thought back to that unpleasant explanation.

Kino.

The venomous bloodline.

The poisonous bloodline.

The bloodline of poison transfer.

The infected bloodline of the Kino Division.

"Those Kino guys have all sorts of poison hidden inside their bodies. They have every poison known to man and unknown to man in vast quantities."

".....Poison?"

"Of course, the users, the *cursers* themselves have already built up an immunity to it, so be it poison or bacteria, they're fine. The Kinos transfer that poison to their opponent."

"Transfer....."

"As easily as you can transfer a cold, they transfer poison. That being said, it's not like they have explosive and indiscriminate viruses like the Black Death or smallpox, they're worse. They choose, they choose, they choose. They reduce their target down to an individual, limit it to an extremely focused point. That's why it's a curse."

"But that's... even if you say poison."

"That's why what they have ranges from already known ones to unknown ones. From things like sleeping medicine, to

mild poisons that cause temporary blindness, to fatal ones that make you unable to breathe the moment you're infected. All sorts."

"....."

The poisonous bloodline.

The poison user, Kino Raichi.

Malicious is the only way to describe it.

"They’re probably characters that can't possibly appear in a mystery novel, since they’re guys that can use undiscovered poisons all they want," Izumu-kun said self-deprecatingly. "There’s many kinds of poison, from fast-acting ones to slow-acting ones, but no matter which it is, it's from ten days ago, right?"

"Yes....."

"Then shouldn't it take effect soon?"

And.

It was soon after.

An unknown cause.

A compromised immune system from an unknown cause.

I didn't even have to think about it.

There was no other way to think about it

Why.

Why did it come to this?

I felt bad.

I felt awfully bad.

I felt as bad as if I was made to drink boiling water.

I felt as bad as if I was made to drink poison.

Kino Raichi.

Why didn't I notice?

I was too careless.

Even though there was no way it’d be settled without any trouble.

Even though I understood that he wasn't ordinary.

"...I wonder."

Suzunashi-san said after a long silence.

"Do you think she'll recover?"

"She has to, right?"

The truth is I didn't know.

What kind of poison Kino-san transferred to Miiko-san, what effects it had. It's something that only Kino-san himself knows.

At that time.

When Miiko-san thought she had fought off Kino-san with her baton, he must have done something to her. The only time there was direct contact was when he passed the letter to her, so was it at that time?

Miiko-san.

Miiko-san, who he thought was me.

"Inoji, you..."

Suzunashi-san said while still not looking at me.

"Did you confess to Asano?"

"……Yes."

"Asano sought advice from me. That blockhead, that idiot who only thought about swords, she was quite seriously using her brain to think about it."

"I'm flattered. Though I was rejected in the end."

"Asano is, you know... she's always been like that."

Suzunashi-san said as if reminiscing.

"An ally of justice."

"……."

"I guess she was just a kid who wanted to be a hero. But you know, if there's no justice in this world, I think that allies of justice are awfully hollow."

"Justice is….."

In the end, justice is merely the name of the winner.

It's not an absolute value.

The allies of the weak aren't necessarily right.

"Well, that's probably just a part of karma. It's just that Asano is that kind of person. At the end of the day, she's just a good-natured person."

"....."

"But I'm surprised that this good-natured person didn't accept your confession. She's someone who can't say no when you ask her something, so I heard that her time at school was a disaster."

"I also heard about that."

"Because of that mess, she was abandoned by her family. That's why those people at the apartment, including you, are like family to Asano."

"....."

Family.

Miiko-san, me, Moeta-kun, Houko-chan, Nanananami, Koutoumaru-san, and Ukigumo-san and... Hime-chan. It's not like everyone really gets along well enough with each other for it to always be harmonious.

But maybe that's how a family is.

At the very least.

It was probably like that for Miiko-san.

"That's why she probably didn't reject you because she didn't like you. It's not like that. I don't know if Asano's poorly spoken words got through to you or not, but she was just thinking about you..."

"She's good-natured."

I said.

"She's a really good-natured person."

Even though she could've left someone like me aside.

Even though it would've been better to not care about me.

She faced Kino-san without even being asked to.

And after all that, it turned out like this.

As expected.

And yet, even in this situation.

I can't be thankful.

I'm angry.

Why didn't she run away?

Why didn't she just let me handle things?

I want to blame her for her weakness.

It's not strength, it's weakness.

It's not kindness, it's being soft.

.....But.

But that's.

That's not at all.

"Suzunashi-san, I'm sorry."

".....About what?"

"Even though I was told to not get Miiko-san involved, she's now stuck in this mess."

"....."

"I'm sure Suzunashi-san has already figured it out, but this is my fault. Even if I were to apologize, I wouldn't be able to apologize enough....."

"I'm sure that Asano protected you of her own will," Suzunashi-san interrupted. "You reap what you sow. This is what happens when you butt in without using your own discretion. If you've spent more than half a year with Inoji, you should be able to understand that much."

"That's not the right way of putting it, Suzunashi-san."

"Even then, the only thing I can say, Inoji....."

Suzunashi-san finally looked at me.

You could see the weariness in her expression, but.

She had the same eyes as usual.

As always, strong and filled with determination.

They were her eyes.

"The only thing I can say is that Asano doesn't regret it one bit. She doesn't think that she was wrong or that she made a mistake. Asano has probably repeated this kind of thing many times in her life. She thinks that if you were to get hurt, it would be better for her to get hurt instead."

"....."

"It's the same way of thinking as you."

"I..."

It's less painful if I'm the one who's hurt.

If it's my own pain, I can bear it.

Other people's wounds are painful.

Because it's a pain I don't understand, it's painful.

"How's it being on the receiving end? Instead of you, it was Asano who ended up getting hurt. It's something that gets to your chest quite a bit, isn't it? You feel more anger than gratitude towards Asano, don't you?"

".....Well, that's....."

After all.

There ended up being a lot of damage and it's still growing.

Even though it could have ended with just me.

Even though it could have been something simpler.

It's becoming more complicated.

More complex.

It's a mess.

"You ever hear of the Porcupine Dilemma?"

"Well, just about."

"But you know, it's a metaphor that only works when both have needles. If one of them is just a mouse, then no matter what, you won't be able to find a comfortable distance."

"....."

"And if both are mice, you never know when they might end up running into a cat. Ah, sorry. Even if it's me, this isn't a situation in which to lecture you."

"No....."

Even in this situation, she's tough.

She's got the same eyes as usual.

There might be some who think that's cold.

Even though her best friend collapsed, without panicking, without being perplexed, without crying or screaming, Suzunashi remained calm as usual. That may be considered to be cold by some.

But that's wrong.

I know how much Suzunashi-san thinks of Miiko-san. I know how much Suzunashi-san likes Miiko-san. I understand

that this toughness is there to support Miiko-san.

She probably won't cry.

But.

No matter what happens, Suzunashi-san will never leave her bedside. Without caring about whether it's a weekday or a day off, whether it's day or night, she will stay beside Miiko-san. She will bear Miiko-san's wound.

"Inoji."

"Yes."

"I don't really know what it is, but you came here straight from Kyushu, didn't you? Leave this place to me and go back home."

"But....."

"Sorry."

Suzunashi-san said, hanging her head.

"Even though I know it's not your fault, when I'm with you, I feel as if I'll end up taking out my anger on you. Though I say some important sounding things, I'm not perfect either. Please forgive for thinking like this.

"Suzunashi-san....."

The truth is, it doesn't matter what's said to me.

It's my fault.

The wounds.

I should be the one bearing the responsibility for those wounds.

"I don't want to take my anger out on you and by doing that make Asano angry. That woman is scary when she's angry.

"Yes... I know that very well."

"I bet," Suzunashi-san responded.

I bowed my head deeply and left the hospital room.

I took the bullet train from Fukuoka to Kyoto Station and then I took the subway directly from Kyoto station to the hospital, so I had to go back to Kyoto Station to pick up my Vespa before returning to the apartment. I had to pay an extra charge due to my unplanned overnight stay in Kyushu.

I bought a ticket to Kyoto Station and went through the ticket gate to the platform. A few minutes later, the train arrived and I boarded it. It was somewhat crowded, but not to the extent that there weren't any empty seats. I sat in front of a middle school student who was listening to music with big headphones on.

And then.

And then.

"....."

What in the world.

Who should I apologize to in this case?

A condition prone to causing accidents.

Once again someone around me got involved.

Wounds.

I dealt the damage.

Without anyone having to tell me, I understood that I'm not the victim, I'm the perpetrator. I've known that for a long time.

No matter what she herself said,

I'm the one that broke Kunagisa Tomo.

Even if it was the result of an accidental plane crash,

I was the one that killed my little sister.

Even if it was the result of a failed experiment,

I was the one that burned **her.**

And that's not all.

I'm not just talking about the old days.

Even now, isn't it like that?

Nothing has changed.

In June, whose fault was it that my classmates were killed?

Whose fault was it that my classmates died?

Was it the demonic killer's fault?

It's not, right? It's my fault.

And Hime-chan.

Hime-chan and Kuchiha-chan and Assistant Professor Kigamine.

They're all dead.

Whose fault is that?

Was it the professional killer's fault?

It's not, right? It's my fault.

I know.

I understand.

I'm the perpetrator.

Damage.

Assault.

Damage.

Assault.

I'm not pitiable.

I'm not in a position to receive pity.

Miiko-san.

Asano Miiko-san.

Without her, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

She always supported me when I was about to collapse.

That's not kindness.

But it wasn't just being soft.

That's not strength.

But it wasn't just weakness.

She has always, without asking anything, silently watched over me.

Keeping a comfortable distance, she stayed beside me.

I felt more angry than grateful.

But more than that.

I wanted to apologize.

I wanted to apologize to Miiko-san.

But that's no good.

I can't do that.

It's not generally something that can be forgiven.

Really.

How many times do we intend to do the same thing over and over again?

Both this game of cat and mouse and match-pump are nauseating.

That confession.

Maybe I shouldn't have done it.

It’s something I understood.

Around me, everyone goes crazy.

Around me, everything goes crazy.

Crazy, crazy, crazy, they just can’t stay normal.

Everyone, everything, never goes as planned.

No matter whose intent it is, it all gets chopped into pieces.

There was no way feelings would reach.

There was no way words could be conveyed.

It's my fault.

Unpleasant regrets were stirring up my head.

They intermixed.

I couldn’t control my thoughts.

Last month... no, before that, if I had just left the apartment, if I hadn't lived there in the first place, without getting involved with anyone, I can't help but think that none of this would have happened.

Jail Alternative.

Back Nozzle.

The fox-masked man would surely laugh at such regrets.

And yet.

No matter how selfish it is, I can't help but think that it would’ve been better if I hadn’t met everyone at the apartment.

Relax.

Calm down.

Don't look back.

Miiko-san isn't dead yet.
Miiko-san is still hurting.
Because of me, no.
For my sake, she's still fighting.
Then I.

What this Nonsense User can do...

"**Even an exPErt in MArtial arts can't WIN against diSEAse, huh...**"

"..... Wha!?"
When I raised my head from it's reclining position.
Almost every passenger inside the train had disappeared.
The only ones left were me and...
The middle schooler sitting in front of me.
A school uniform, a short sleeved shirt.
White sneakers.
A school cap and glasses with rectangular lenses.
And big headphones.
The sound of a complex melody was leaking out.
"....."
Where did all the other passengers go? Just a few minutes ago, nearly all of the seats were filled. Did they all get off at the previous station? Everyone? All of those people?
"Stop lOOking around, no one's HEre. They were IN the way of me talKING with you, *Ii-chan*, so I HAd them disapPEAR. It's not LIke I kiLLed them."
The middle schooler in front of me spoke.
He was looking at me.
His words were a little broken.
They were strangely high-pitched.

"I'm NoiSe. It's an old WOrd from BriTAIN meanIng *interFerence*."

"Noise....."

"The eleVENth step of the *THIRteen StairS*."

The *Thirteen Stairs*!

Then he's not just a middle schooler!

"IT seems KiNO-san's trick finaLLY took eFFect, so Mr. Fox told me TO come checK on you. ObviouSLY, I didn't cOme to see how that WOman is, I came to SEE how you were, *Ii-cHan*."

"....Hmm."

I.

After having raised my hips slightly, I sank back into the seat again.

Seeing that, the middle schooler, Noise-kun laughed merrily. No, just because he's wearing a middle school uniform doesn't necessarily mean he's a middle school student.

"I THought you'd be shocKed, but you're unexPEctedLy cOOl, *Ii-chaN*."

"Honestly, I am disappointed."

I said while staring at Noise-kun.

It wasn't on impulse.

"You and also Mr. Fox, Saitou Takashi. I overestimated you, or rather, I misjudged you. I didn't think you were the kind of people who'd be so aggressive about getting unrelated people involved."

In that underground parking lot.

The man with the fox mask said that he was the one that told Kino-san that Miiko-san was *Ii-chan*. In other words, it's not the result of a simple accident or misunderstanding, the fox-masked man intentionally targeted not me, but Miiko-san.

"He's a PErson that wantS to see the eNd of the worLD, so of course he's an opporTUNist. For that perSON, everything concerNed and UNconcerneD, related and unRElated, is all equaL. That woman was just unLUCKy enough to have CAUght his eyE by acciDent."

She caught his eye, huh.

I guess that's also true.

He said that he happened to see Miiko-san in the reception area while she was chatting with Rabumi-san. It's likely that he was planning to attack me right up until that moment.

On the fox-masked man's whim.

Accidentally.

The target switched to Miiko-san.

"……Even then, what meaning is there in involving Miiko-san?"

"RighT, rigHt, I have to say that or I'll get scolDED by Mr. FoX. I need to FULfil my role as the eXplaIner."

Noise-kun lifted one finger and pointed at me.

The train passed by one station.

No one came on board.

The next stop is Kyoto Station.

I need to get off to retrieve the Vespa.

……However, this member of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Noise.

That kid with the yukata that was with the fox-masked man at the underground parking lot. It seems he's not the same person. The kid with the yukata was hiding their face with a mask, so I can't say anything about that, but their stature is completely different. Noise-kun is on the small side, but that yukata kid was even more petite.

Then……

Who's that kid in the yukata?

The other candidates would be the professional killers or the assassin, but because of their characteristics, it's probably not them (The professional killers are twins, and the assassin doesn't show his appearance in front of people). So excluding the three that Izumu-kun has met, considering his age, it's not Kajou Akira, and if it's not the swordsmith or the thought manipulator that operate more in the background, then it's that puppeteer, Migishita Rurero?

"BasiCally, it's a PROblem of motiVAtion."

Noise-kun said with his high pitched voice.

"For MR. Fox, you're the eneMY he was alwayS searching for and that he FInally fouNd. His souL is trembling and he's agoniZING in pleaSUre! MeeTINg you here was uNUsually good forTune."

To make the world end.

To see the end of the world. The enemy.

How long has he been thinking about that?

Was it since the time he met Kuchiha-chan?

No, not then. If I remember correctly, it's from even before that.

For the fox-masked man, meeting Kuchiha-chan was just a means. Even before that, he had always wished to see the end of the world.

He wanted to know the world's end.

Even after being expelled from causality, he didn't give up.

That's why.

He gathered talented people to make the world end.

It's probably like that for the *Thirteen Stairs*,

And.

For me as well.

"There's a REAson that Mr. Fox made you his enemy, but flipping that aRound, what aBOUt you? *Ii-chaN*."

"....."

"From your point of VieW, isn't Mr. Fox simply someONE that you suddenLy met last month, soMeone that you simpLY met on the sTreet without any connecTION?"

Noise-kun operated his headphones and apparently stopped the music, as the sound stopped leaking out of them. Based on the fact that there wasn't any cord, this pair of headphones looked like an all-in-one music device.

"IF there's no connection THEre's no affiNIty. If there's no hatred there's no reSENTment. No causaLIty or anything. JUst a weird guy saying incompreHENsible stuff, right? He's a weird

gUy, but he's just trying TO protect himself frOm the sparKs that are going to come down on hiM, isn't it LIke that?"

"…..Who knows."

"**That's NO gooD**, *Ii-chan*."

"……."

"If you'RE Mr. FOx's enemy, then the match is still one-SIded. Mr. Fox must be an eNEmy for you too. An attacK must be done for the saKE of attacKING, it must neVer be an attack for the sake of deFENDing. And the way Mr. Fox sees iT, *Ii-chan*, the *NonSENse User*. There's not enough hatreD in your acTions."

"Not enough…"

"No, maybe there's NOne? THAt's what I thought just noW. Even though your neighBour became the tarGET of an unprovoked attack and one of those *eneMies* brazenly shows up in fronT Of you, you didn't even stand UP."

"I'm cool, like you said. Just cool. I'm just putting on airs."

"Even if that woman DIes, it looks like you'd SAY the same thing, *Ii-chan*."

"……."

"WEll, even then, did that MOtivate you a little BIT? Were you abLe to see Mr. Fox as an eNemy? You saiD you were disappoinTED by Mr. Fox, so why don't YOU take this opportunity to show him you're diSAppointed?"

"…….Just for that, huh."

Just for that reason, Miiko-san got involved.

Just to make me mad.

Just to provoke me.

Just so that as the fox-masked man recognizes me as his enemy,

I should recognize the fox-masked man as my enemy.

Just for that.

I will kill, dismember, gather it up, line it up, and expose it.

Even though I said that properly.

So facing him with fear is not enough?

Is he saying that I should face him with hatred?

Is he saying that I should face him with the intent to kill?

Like Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

"At first, *Ii-chan*, it SEEms he planned to uSe Kino-san's trick oN you and put his LIFE on the line by turning you inTO an enemy, but at the last MOment, he must have thought thaT it would be BEtter to use the old-fashioneD hosTAGe strategy. He must HAve thought that seeing that woMan at the recepTion was a sign."

"Putting his life on the line?"

Those words... no, wait, what?

That means.

"Are you saying that..."

"EXActly. **There's an ANTIdote**."

"....."

"If you DrinK it, you're SAved. If you don't, you Die."

At this point, Noise-kun smiled boldly.

"If you Want the antiDOte, just come to the desiGNAted place at the designated TIme, that's all."

".....I intended to go from the start. I had no intention of running."

"EVen then, your motivation became toTAlly different, didn't it? Having an obJective Or not is totally difFERent. And when you wiLL eventually want to run away, now you no LONger can. Your optionS have been sealeD."

If I want to save Miiko-san, huh.

That's probably the only way to save her.

They can't do anything at the hospital.

Because they can't do anything, it's a *curse*.

At most, they could slow down the progression.

If the hospitalization was too late because Miiko-san was being stubborn, then it's painful.

"In that case, Noise-kun, stop saying such carefree things and take me to where the fox-masked man is. Every second is critical. There's no guarantee that her body will hold until the 30th."

"You don't nEEd to worry abOUT that. DesPIte what I said earlier, Mr. Fox doesn't liKe taking unpleaSANt means. It's what you'd call aesTheTics. If NuregINU-kun heard that, he'd laugh, but involVINg other people isn't beautiFUL."

"But currently……."

"BasiCAlly, you can think that her life's SAFEty is guaranTeed. At the very least, UNtil the 30th of SePtember. There's no point to KEEping a hostage if they're not safe, RIGht?"

"That's true, but……"

This time I stood up.

Moving my feet to face Noise-kun.

I stood up just in front of where he was sitting.

"As of right now, I don't see any reason for me to let you off the hook, Noise-kun."

"……..So the cooL *Ii-chan* became a bit hot-heaDED? Looks like Mr. Fox's pLAN had an effeCT."

"Whether you refuse to take me with you or not, if I can get you to tell me the location of the fox-masked man by any means necessary, I won't have to wait until the 30th."

"That's a fine IDea, but it's impossiBle."

"Why do you think that? I'm pretty desperate right now. You can't really know what I'll do."

"That's obvious. AMOng the *ThirTeen STAirs*, I am a different TYpe than Kino-SAN or Nureginu-SAN, I have nothing whatsoever to dO with Mr. Fox's taSteS. I was chosen to be IN *Thirteen StairS* for a sinGle Goal. **I ENTered thE *ThirtEEn Stairs* just to FAce you. I am an Anti-*Ii-chAn* assassIn**."

"Just to face me…..?"

So the reason Izumu-kun didn't recognize him is because of that?

The assassin for me picked by Mr. Fox.

But what does that mean?

"Mr. Fox finisheD his research inTo you and then he piCKed me. That's why you Won't be able TO lay a finger on me. I'm

goinG to predict that **you CAN't do ANYthing to me**."

"Hmm..." I shrugged. "Even a demonic killer didn't talk to me with such a big mouth, Noise-kun."

"NoIse-kUn, huh..."

Noise-kun twisted his lips in a meaningful way.

"But Noise is just soMEthing that Mr. Fox attached to me haphAZardly because he neeDed to take a NOte, **a sYmbol for the sake of a symBOL**. Before that, I was caLLed And."

"....."

"BeFOre that, GunKy."

"....."

"Before that, HArrier. Before thAT, NUMber Nineteen."

"....."

"BEfore that... **I wasn't called anYthing**."

Noise-kun.

No, the young boy in front of me stood up,

And moved his face right next to mine.

"Hey, *Ii-chaN*. **Does your SO-called nonsense worK against someone who DOesn't have a NAme?**"

".....!!"

"It seems I HIT the marK."

The train slowed down.

The announcement echoed.

Next stop is Kyoto Station. Next stop is Kyoto Station.

The way to get off is on the left.

"Since the beGInning of the year, or rather, since you came back to JaPAN, you've been involved in a NUMber of cases and you've been able to solve those cases splenDIDly. You solved eveRY case. HOwever! There was ONE case you couldn't SOlve, you couldn't solve it without borROwing Aikawa-san's helP. The *murder CAse* that happened in the manSion of the former heiress to the AKAgami family on WET Crow's FeaTher IslanD."

".....Ugh....."

"Because **the reAL culprit in that caSE didn't have A name**."

Her.

The nobody who doesn’t know who she is.

She who’s without even a name.

She who’s only interested in becoming other people,

Abandoning every style.

She who’s without a self.

She who’s without a name.

She who killed Sonoyama Akane.

She who replaced Sonoyama Akane.

I.

In the end, I couldn't see through her scheme.

That's.

That's because...

"....We’ve arrived at the STATion."

Noise-kun pointed towards the open door on the left.

"I’LL be waitinG for you in front of the schOOl gates of SuMIyuRI Academy the DAY after tomorrow. I’ll be a so-CAlled guide. I’m the only person in the *THIrteen Stairs* who can be saFE after speaKING with you besides Mr. Fox. THE next time we meet, I’m going to MAke you screaM."

"....."

"Get oFF. Do you intend to GO to the neXt staTION?"

".....Just tell me one thing."

I distanced myself from Noise-kun.

And got off the train.

From the platform, I turned towards Noise-kun and asked him a question.

"How does it feel to have a body and a soul without a name?"

"You know that BEtter than ME, don't you?"

"I want to hear how you feel."

"It’s so Obvious that you don’t eVEN need to ask, there’s ONly one anSwer."

Noise-kun smiled widely.

"I feeL like DYing."

The door closed.

The train with Noise-kun went towards the next station and left. Without feeling the need to follow it with my eyes until the end, I climbed the stairs up from the platform to the surface.

After paying an additional fee for parking (150 yen), I rode the Vespa back to the apartment. I was tired from yesterday's trip, so I decided I should leave my baggage on the ground and get some rest before continuing to act. It's best to leave the hospitalized Miiko-san to Suzunashi-san. There's nothing that I can do by staying at her side. I'm not worthy to hold Miiko-san's hand right now.

There are more actions I must take.

No matter what was said to me, no matter what kind of noise I heard, I had no intention of waiting patiently until the 30th. My motivation has certainly exploded, just as the fox-masked man wanted.

Driving on the Vespa far faster than the legal speed limit, I arrived at the parking lot in Nakadachiuri near the rundown apartment at record speed.

There.

Was one figure.

Leaning against Miiko-san's fiat, there was Houko-chan.

With her arms crossed.

Waiting for my slowed Vespa to arrive.

"....."

I parked the Vespa in my own designated space.

I turned the key, turning off the engine.

Houko-chan, with her arms crossed and without even trying to come closer, said, "welcome back, Nonsense User Onii-chan."

".....I'm back, Houko-chan."

"So something finally happened."

Houko-chan suddenly cut in.

Without any introduction, she cut in.

"What do you mean... about Miiko-san?"

"I was thinking that. I was thinking that soon, something

would happen," Houko-chan said without mercy. "That's why I warned you so much."

"....."

"Did you notice? The last few days... rather, ever since you got out of the hospital, Onii-chan, you've been tailed by someone."

".....Tailed?"

Does she mean by someone else other than Houko-chan or Akari-san? Is she saying I didn't notice something like that?

.....No.

I even let Kino-san run away.

After all that, no matter what kind of mistake I make, I won't be surprised.

If that's the case, then did this person follow me all the way to Kyushu? Then I should consider that my meeting with Izumu-kun was reported. Obviously, since Mr. Fox was the one who set the stage for it, there won't be much damage, but....

"That's why I wanted to keep Onii-chan under surveillance. To be honest, it's usual for Onii-chan to be involved with weird things, but this time, I think it goes a bit too far."

".....Sorry that I made you worry. I misunderstood a bit, my bad." I examined my surroundings. "So am I still being followed as we speak?"

"No, it seems that you've already been released from it now. They've finished their mission is what they're saying. That tailing technique is something that's been passed down for a long time in my clan, so it's normal that Onii-chan didn't notice," Houko-chan said. "If it's someone that good, it's probably Nureginu-san."

"Nureginu... Yamiguchi Nureginu?"

"You know him?"

Houko-chan tilted her head slightly.

"Houko-chan, do you know him too?"

"Rather than just knowing him, he's a relative."

"....."

I let out a gasp.

"Th-then perhaps, **the house from which you fled**..."

".....No, even if you exaggerate it and put it in bold, from my point of view, it's surprising that Onii-chan didn't notice until now."

Houko-chan looked fed up.

That's right, she swings knives around, she kills small animals, I thought she was just a strange kid, but then, maybe Moeta-kun too...

"Hah."

Houko-chan looked even more fed up.

"Ishinagi... the clan of reapers."

"So that was it....."

"So rather than playing dumb, you just didn't know....."

"Yes....."

"Didn't you at least think it was a bit suspicious?"

"No....."

"Even slightly?"

"Not at all....."

"....."

"Sorry....."

Uwah.....

So even before meeting Zerozaki, I was living under the same roof as people from the world of *fairytales* and *dreams*.....

"Well, Moeta and I both left home before we started working, so we just stayed somewhat in obscurity and haven't experienced murder yet."

"That's a relief...."

Does the fox-masked man know this fact? If even me, the person concerned, hadn't noticed it, then it might be fair to say that he doesn't know.

"Hmm. In life, you never know what's going to happen. I didn't expect this sort of twist..."

"Onii-chan, are you actually stupid?"

"No, it was just surprisingly hard to notice."

"Apart from Onii-chan, I think everyone that should have noticed has already noticed....."

"No, no, you surprisingly couldn't tell about Hime-chan."

"Hime-nee-sama is... no, it's fine."

Houko-chan let out a big sigh.

I felt like I was being looked down upon.

"Well... that's why, to be honest, I have a pretty good idea of the situation. That disease that Mii-nee-san has, I suspect that it's the work of Kino."

"Yes. Well, if you know that much, I'll tell you everything."

"I hope so."

"I'll start from the beginning of everything."

Just in case, I took another look both ways. I didn't see anyone for now. However, thinking about the possibility of being heard by someone passing by, we should head indoors... no. Thinking about it this much, I reconsidered. We're already at a stage where we don't need to worry about that. Even if we were heard, it's not something we can do something about. If something could be done, I would rather prefer it to be done. Things will probably not get any worse than they are now.

At this point, it's already the worst.

Houko-chan listened to my story with almost no reaction and with almost no interjections, as if she wasn't paying any attention, without changing her expression at all. She slightly knit her eyebrows and made an unpleasant face when she heard the name at the top of the *Killing Names*, the Niounomiya Troupe, and also when heard the name Yamiguchi Nureginu among the *Thirteen Stairs*. However, it was just that, and she didn't say anything.

And Kino Raichi.

".....That's how it is."

After finishing telling everything, I didn't feel like I told everything at all. That's right, no matter how completely you tell it, you can't communicate all of the background. If the background of the story is missing, it becomes woefully

inadequate.

But for an outline, it should be enough.

Houko-chan said, "I see."

"Now that I understand the situation this well, it's a mystery how Moeta and I were out of the loop."

"Yeah....."

It’s probably because I didn't notice.

If you let Assistant Professor Kigamine and the fox-masked man talk, they would surely have said with a special tone, as if rolling their tongues, and above all in an indescribable way, that it was the connection of fate, the convergence of inevitability, but because of me it was a meaningless foreshadowing of what was to come.

"But then," Houko-chan said with her arms still crossed and without changing her posture. "From here on, it's something within our domain, isn't it?"

"No... but, Houko-chan," I said, a little flustered. I was responsible for Miiko-san, so I talked about it, but I don't intend to get Houko-chan involved. I only spoke because I couldn't hide it. "Not noticing your family was careless of me, but Houko-chan, didn't you say it before? That the reason you left your house was because you didn't like the family business. You said the same about Moeta-kun."

"....."

Houko-chan's eyes were cold.

Like ice, no.

As cold as a metal.

"I got out because I wanted to be a normal girl. That's what I said, didn't I?"

"Did you?"

"I did."

She did.

As I recall, that was when I had just moved into the apartment. I couldn’t stand the thought of a child this young living alone with her brother without a guardian and without

going to school, so I brought up the topic.

At that time, I didn't know much about Houko-chan. I think I know her better now. At least, more than I did at that time.

That's why.

I can't involve Houko-chan.

I can't involve her like Miiko-san.

"In the end, you can't escape being born and growing up, Nonsense User Onii-chan. The soul of a child of three is the same at 100."

"…….Houko-chan."

Those words.

They're not just about Moeta-kun and herself.

They're pointed at Yukariki Ichihime.

And they're pointed at me.

"In the first place, I'm a woman of low character by nature."

"……."

"They also say the fair-skinned are cursed for seven generations."

"Houko-chan….."

If you're going to say that, it's "hide the seven misfortunes" (did she hear this from Hime-chan?), but this wasn't a situation where I could make a retort over such small stuff.

"Well, it was only for a few years, no different than the blink of an eye, but let's just say that I had a good dream as if I were a butterfly."

"A dream… that's not the case."

However, if you say it like that, then it's even more so.

Then it's really like Hime-chan all over again

Like me all over again.

What a farce of pre-established harmony.

How many times do I have to repeat this?

How many times does it need to repeat?

Victim and perpetrator and damage and assault.

How many substitutes have been prepared?

There's no replacement.

How many times do I need to say it for you to understand?

"Houko-chan, you..."

"I guess it's been something that's been decided and predetermined for a long time. It's just a matter of chance. For Mii-nee-san and Nonsense User Onii-chan to meet an existence like me when you were in trouble, it's too much to be a coincidence. The existence of the *Story*, I don't mind believing it somewhat."

".....Your normal life... will you throw it away?"

"Even if you say normal, I'm nothing more than a nonhuman wearing the skin of a human. That's why it's fine."

Houko-chan said.

"I will take off my human skin."

It was an instant.

I was only distracted for an instant.

For just an instant, I felt fear towards Houko-chan.

The hair on my skin stood up and shivers ran down my spine.

But.

It was in that instant.

That a knife had stabbed through my shirt.

At the center of my chest, a knife pierced deeply.

It was Houko-chan's knife.

The one she used sometimes when she peeled apples at the hospital.

That knife.

The butterfly knife.

That's.

The blade penetrating my organs.

"Onii-chan, please rest a bit."

".....Houko-cha-"

Thonk, my legs collapsed.

What's this.....

It's hot. Even though it doesn't hurt, I can't breathe. I can't put any strength into my body. I can't stay standing. I crouched under Houko-chan's feet.

Houko-chan hadn't even uncrossed her arms.

Without even uncrossing her arms, how.....

Before I knew it.

As if time had skipped, I couldn't sense it.

So this is a *Killing Name*?

Are you saying... that this is a Yamiguchi?

Then it goes beyond overboard.

"I don't want to see Onii-chan get hurt anymore. Onii-chan's wounds... I can't bear to see them. I said that before, didn't I?"

".....Guuuuuh."

"When you saw Mii-nee-san in the hospital, you felt pain didn't you, Onii-chan? Then please stop now."

"....."

"Please stop. Let's end it now. There's no need for Onii-chan to get hurt anymore. Onii-chan doesn't need to suffer any longer."

Houko-chan softly walked towards me.

She uncrossed her arms and held my aching head with them.

"Onii-chan, you've been fighting all by yourself, haven't you? With all kinds of people. In many places. Without anyone knowing. Always alone, always getting hurt."

"....."

"You've really done a good job until now."

".....Aaaaah."

"So I think it's time for you to get some rest now."

My consciousness...

It's fading.

I can't see.

As if there was a fog.

As if there was a mist.

As if there was a haze.

I can't see.

It's fading.

My consciousness……

"When thou art dry, I shalt give thee my blood. When thou feel starved, I shalt give thee my flesh. I shalt atone for thy sins. I shalt repay for thy errors. I shalt bear thy mission. I shalt receive thy epidemics. I shalt present all mine honor to thee. I shalt offer all mine glory to thee. I shalt follow alongside thee as a barrier. I shalt delight along with thy delight. I shalt sorrow along with thy sorrow. I shalt live along thee as a scout. I shalt support your exhausted bones with mine entire body. These hands shalt become thine and grab a weapon. These legs shalt become thine and step against others. These eyes shalt become thine and capture enemies. I shalt fulfill thy lust with all mine power. I shalt wholeheartedly service thee. I shalt throw mine name away for thee. I shalt throw mine pride away for thee. I shalt throw mine ideals away for thee. I shalt love thee. I shalt worship thee. I shalt not feel anything but thee. I shalt not be captured by anything but thee. I shalt not wish for anything other than thee. I shalt not lust for anything other than thee. I shalt not sleep without thy permission. I shalt not breathe without thy permission. Just one word, I shalt only search for a reason in thy word. This miserable and pitiable me who is not even worth a lowly slave for thee. I swear this here."

"……Houko……"

Houko-chan's voice echoed as if it was somebody else's problem.

It was as if I could hear it, but not hear it.

What is she saying?

I still have things I must do.

I must.

It's my responsibility.

I must be the one to get hurt.

I must get hurt.

"Onii-chan doesn't have to get hurt anymore."

Houko-chan said with a strong and calm tone.

"……..Nonsense User Onii-chan, you don't need to do anything. Leave everything to me. It’s about time for you to relax."

"……."

"Good night, Onii-chan."

Softly.

Houko-chan took her hands away from me.

Losing my support, I collapsed onto the parking lot's ground.

I couldn't grasp anything.

I felt the knife go in even deeper.

I felt the sensation of blood on my body.

I heard footsteps.

With small strides.

The footsteps of someone leaving.

Getting farther and farther away.

Becoming unhearable.

The asphalt against my cheek felt awfully cold.

Cold.

Cold.

Cold.

Cold.

C o l d.

……

I kind of feel like sleeping.

0

A white frozen blade and a red burnt blade.
Choose the one you want to cut with and the one you want to be cut with.
A blade for a blade.

1

When I woke up, I was on a hospital bed.

"I-I'm surprised....."

I thought the series was over.

Rather.

I thought I had died for good this time.

My joints felt sore so I tried to move around, but after feeling a twitching pain in my chest, I stopped and returned to my original position.

"You shouldn't move."

Looking over suddenly.

By the side of the bed, a nurse, Rabumi-san, was sitting on a chair and reading a hardcover book. From what I could see, she closed the book and adjusted her glasses and then, after a pause.

"Ii~, welcome back."

She said.

"I mean, don't come back after less than ten days. Even a middle schooler running away from home has more guts."

"....."

I see, so I was transported to the hospital.

That's right, I, with Houko-chan.....

"It was a close one. If it had been one second later, Ii~, you'd be dead."

"……..It wasn’t really one second though, right?"

"At the very least, it was the biggest pinch up until now. You lost a lot of blood. I mean, your organs were cut so precisely that even me, a nurse, was impressed. It was a completely lethal wound."

"Lethal wound……"

Seriously?

She really has no mercy.

"It’s a good thing your stomach was empty or it really wouldn't have been a joke. No, it's already not a joke. What? Are you on a diet or something?"

"A diet……."

Ah, that's right, I was absorbed in the conversation in Kyushu that I ended up only drinking coffee. After that, I didn't have the time to feed my empty stomach……..

"It looked like a knife wound, but who did it to you?"

"It’s a lover's quarrel. I tried to force myself on a thirteen-year-old girl, but she unexpectedly fought back."

"Wait a minute, I'll go call the police."

"Haha, it's an assault charge, right?"

"No, rape."

"It was a joke."

"It's not a joke."

No, it's a joke, isn't it?

I mean…….

I looked at the clock in the hospital room.

Afternoon. Well, it’s probably not that only a few hours have passed since then, so it must be the next day. It seems that I’ve been sleeping for an entire day.

"Not one day," Rabumi-san said. "You slept for two days."

"…….Huh?"

"Today’s like the 30th of September."

"Like?"

Even though she's an adult?

No, that’s not the focus here.

"It’s already the 30th?"

"That's right."

"....."

I hurriedly tried to raise my body, which was lying on its back, but I was stopped by Rabumi’s quick movements.

"I told you not to move, didn't I? If you move without thinking, your wound will reopen easily. Like a snap. We just stitched it together, so you need to be careful. We haven’t even removed the stitches yet."

".....I need to go."

"Huh?"

"I have a place I need to go to."

"....You know, Ii~,in this world there's the expression complete rest. The current you definitely needs that."

"Guh," I was pushed against the bed. As if to remind me, Rabumi-san put more force into her hands and then released me.

"I don't know where you need to go, but it’s the same as going to die. You need to cancel it, cancel. It's not a date with a girl or something, right?"

"It's definitely not something that nice."

Even without an injury.

It’d be the same as heading to my death.

"But....."

"In this situation, there's no buts. It's a serious injury, isn’t it? You were in a critical condition. The ambulance was packed with doctors. You were in the ICU yesterday, and now your consciousness finally came back. Your condition was even more serious than Asano-san's."

"Miiko-san....." Ah, that's right. Miiko-san is in this hospital too. "Rabumi-san, how is Miiko-san’s condition?"

"It keeps getting worse."

"You said that rather plainly."

"Because it's useless to lie to you."

Rabumi-san looked at me slowly, from top to bottom, as if

staring into me.

".....Was that also your fault?"

"That's right. Though I can't give you the details. Even if I did, you wouldn't believe me. But at the very least, I feel a certain amount of responsibility for what happened to Miiko-san."

"How serious."

Rabumi-san smiled bitterly.

"Look at me. Even as we speak, I make it look like I'm attending to you, but I'm actually just avoiding doing the paperwork I'm supposed to be doing."

"Please do your work."

"You're carrying too much weight. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"...Yeah."

It was told to me by Miiko-san.

Right.

That's right.

She said that I'm carrying too much of everything.

Well, that's probably true.

That's right, there's no words for it.

Other people's lives are too heavy to carry, they're not something that's meant to be carried. Not to mention, I can't even control my own life.....

Not to mention.

.....Right.

It might have been too great of a role for me.

No matter how much the fox-masked man sees me as an enemy.

In the end, I'm just a guy with a broken bottom.

Houko-chan could probably see that.

To a detestable degree.

To a detestable degree, she could see it.

A vessel full of cracks.

A vessel full of wounds.

To the point that it’s hard to watch.

If this is a story.

Maybe my role is already over.

The opening act is over.

Now it’s Houko-chan’s and Moeta-kun’s turn.

"....."

But to think that those two were...

Maybe I was the weird one for not noticing, but if that's the case, maybe it really is for the best to leave the rest to them.

I guess you could say that they’re the right people in the right place.

If there’s someone like Noise-kun in the *Thirteen Stairs*, then my role is nothing more than a speck of dust.

That's why.

That's why the rest is a problem of pride.

My pride.

A problem.

A problem, and a solution.

"Say, Rabumi-san."

"What? Being formal isn't like you."

"No, I don’t think this is really the kind of thing I should say in a hospital, but for me, it's pretty hard to live."

"Hmm. Is that so."

"What about Rabumi-san?"

"Not really. There are times when I feel like it’s a pain, but yeah, I guess I’m generally doing just fine."

"Is that so....."

"You know, I’ve been doing this job since I was still a trainee. It’s like this hospital is my home now."

Rabumi-san said.

"That's why I hate people who don't feel like living."

"....."

"It’s the same even outside of the hospital. I hate those idiots that only pretend to be alive. I think that anyone who’s not thinking about a better tomorrow would be better off dead."

"……Right."

They should die.

It'll be easier if they die.

Once you die, it's over.

"You know, Rabumi-san, I've caused a lot of people trouble in my life. Bringing misfortune and disaster to many people, that's how I lived. I've dragged in everyone around me, without exception."

Making the gravity around me go crazy.

Making the coordinates around me go crazy.

Making them crazy, then making them even more crazy.

Nothing goes as planned.

Everything is vague.

Everything is doubtful.

What arises is surely just an insignificant detail.

But because of that insignificant detail.

Everyone becomes unhappy.

Not able to move any further.

Reaching their limits.

Converging.

Accelerating.

You're a nuisance to others just by staying alive.

That's why you'd be better off dead.

"It's been like that since I was a kid. Right, thinking about it now, I should really be aware of it by this point. The word "troublemaker" can't fully describe it. The people around me get hurt and end up dead. Nothing ever goes well, nothing ever goes as planned. I saw the whole thing coming from the start, you know. I knew that nothing was going to work out. That's why I preferred being half hearted and unreliable."

I preferred not producing results.

Because I knew it'd become something bad either way.

Because I knew nothing good would come out.

That's why.

I just wanted to avoid the worst.

"Maybe I was the one making the Story go mad. Even though it was coherent, with proper development, with good composition, with a plot that had its ups and downs for entertainment, and, well, with a few misprints and errors, but even then, they just gave it some charm. It made you laugh and, more than that, it was enjoyable. It made you cry when you were supposed to. It was that kind of Story. And just by myself, I ruined it."

I've ruined the foreshadowing

I ruined the Story.

For the fortune-teller who had the power of reading the Story, for Himena Maki, I really was just an annoying existence. Even more so than a "misprint" like Kunagisa Tomo, I was an annoying existence.

And the fox-masked man.

From the perspective of that man who greedily desires to see the end of the world, the end of the Story. An existence that originally should never have existed, that should be an impossibility like me or that demonic killer, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, we're probably something that cannot be ignored.

Because of that, it goes crazy again.

Even Miiko-san's story goes crazy.

Even Houko-chan's story goes crazy.

For the fox-masked man, it's surely something to laugh at.

That person doesn't recognize individual stories.

He doesn't recognize individuality.

No matter who does it, it's the same.

No matter who it is, it's the same.

When you get right down to it, the one to witness the end of the world doesn't even have to be him. He would probably go that far.

He doesn't think anything about denying himself.

Denial and affirmation are synonymous.

Denial and affirmation are equivalent.

But I.

I am completely.

Repeatedly now, I've said a lot of things.

But all of that wasn't serious.

It was just lies.

It was all nonsense.

Ah……

Who was it again that named me the Nonsense User?

"I'm really a bother. I know that myself. The things that everyone spends a long time building up, I come along and trip their legs and make it all collapse. That's the case even when I'm not thinking about anything. And when it comes to things that I hate or things that I come to like, anything that has even a little bit of my will mixed in, it's even more devastating. That's why when my sister died I decided."

Yes, I decided.

That was the first time I made a decision in my life.

The first and last decision.

That was the only thing that wasn't nonsense, it was a real decision.

All other decisions were just an extension of that one.

Without any meaning.

At that time, I made that decision.

"That I will not like anyone and I will not hate anyone."

I won't give anything to anyone.

That's why I won't receive anything.

Rejecting everything.

That was the Nonsense User's only pride.

I decided to not care about other people's existence.

The me who could like people.

Decided to not like anyone

I refused to be liked by anyone.

For my own sake, and for the sake of others.
The me who could kill people.
Decided to not kill anyone.
I also decided to not kill myself.
I decided to not become a demonic killer.
"That's how it should have been, and yet..."
I did it again.
I've ruined it again.
I'm really sorry.
I want to apologize.
Who should I apologize to?
The back that I want to apologize to, whose back is it?
"Why did things become like this?"
Why.
Does everyone break that easily?
Isn't it funny?
It's absurd.
Even though I didn't wish for anything.
Even though I didn't resent anything.
"That's why I already..."
There's a monster inside my body.
Even calling it inhuman would be disgusting.
"I already, since a long time ago..."
As if there was nothing left.
As if there was no body, spirit, mind, soul,
Or even a name.
It goes without saying, you don't even have to ask...

"...Felt like dying."

I glanced at Rabumi-san.
She was dozing off.
"....."

"Huh? Did you finish talking?"

".....Yes."

"Yeah. Right. Well, how pitiable. Err, then, if you want to die, why not just die?"

It was a half-minded impression.

It wasn't even meant to be a scolding.

"I told you, I hate those who say they want to die."

".....Of course you do, Rabumi-san."

"What's that? It feels like you're making fun of me."

"I'm just envious."

"Won't you stop talking like you're looking at things from afar? I'm talking to you face to face."

"No matter how close we talk, my feelings will never get transmitted to Rabumi-san."

To those who have never thought of wanting to die.

I want to die.

I want to die.

I want to die.

I want to die right now.

And to the same extent, I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

That's what I thought.

After Hime-chan's death, that's what I thought.

But ultimately that's just another heretical idea.

The people living normally.

Do they really not wish to die?

Not wishing.

They don't even realize that they're alive.

Living isn't a miracle to them.

It's a miracle for me.

It's an impossible miracle.

I want to die.

However, I absolutely don't want to die.

Even if I think that I don't want to die...

The feeling of wanting to die doesn't go away.

"Rabumi-san cannot understand how I feel."

"Certainly, I may not understand your feelings. After all, you're really quite incomprehensible," Rabumi-san prefaced with that before continuing, "but the feelings of the people that were around you... well, I kind of understand them."

"....."

"Like I said before, I've been doing this job for quite a while. A lot of people come to the hospital with various physical and mental wounds. A wound is, no matter what you say, always painful enough to make you want to cry. That's the same for everyone."

"....."

"Well, misfortune is contagious. If one person is unhappy, then everyone around that person will be unhappy too. Even if you think that other people's misfortune tastes as sweet as honey, if you go too far, it'll just make you feel bad. That's why all the people who come to the hospital, whether they're patients, their relatives, or visitors, all have a very depressing look on their faces."

The air is dark, Rabumi-san said.

The air is dark, stagnant.

No matter how beautifully you decorate the hallways and rooms.

No matter how much you polish the windows and hallways.

You can't decorate the air.

You can't polish the air.

"That's why I'm doing my best to brighten up the atmosphere in the hospital, but..."

"Eh....."

So there was a serious reason for that personality?

No matter how you think about it, it's not natural.

Rabumi-san grinned.

"I think that it might not be necessary for your case."

I think, she repeated.

"Despite this being the sixth time you've been in the

hospital this year, a lot of people have come to visit you in that time. People from your apartment building, that blue haired girl, that girl who looks like a model. I brought many people to your hospital room."

"....."

"All of them had good faces."

Rabumi-san said a bit bashfully.

"The people around you all looked happy."

".....Happy....."

"You're making everyone around you happier than you know and I think they like you a lot more than you think they do."

".....Rabumi-san....."

Someone who likes me unconditionally.

Someone who is saved just by me being alive.

Someone like that.

If they existed.

If there was even one.

"Well, maybe they were just in a good mood because a guy that they hate is in the hospital."

"....."

She tagged on a punchline.

This person really does unbelievable things.

Rabumi-san said, "well then..." and stood up from the pipe chair.

"I should really get to work now."

"This was also a good job."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. That's what I think."

"I'm glad to hear that."

And Rabumi-san turned to leave the room.

Right when she was about to put her hand on the door, she turned back.

"Ah, right, right. Ii~."

".....What is it?"

"After I leave, no doctors will come to see you until five in the evening. Also that maid you're living with brought a change of clothes so I put them in the locker, but you absolutely must not sneak out of the room," Rabumi-san put up a finger and said. "Do you understand? If you understood, then give me a clear answer."

"....."

I.

I firmly nodded.

"I understand, Rabumi-san."

"Hey, hey, not like that. I meant to say that you could leave without anyone noticing. I swear, you're really dense."

"No, I understood that much."

"I was really cool today, wasn't I?"

"Well, just a little....."

"Fufufu. I'm always joking around so that, when the time comes, I can say cool lines like that."

"That's a very useless effort....."

What happened to the mood of the hospital?

"Nyahaha."

She laughed.

Rabumi-san waved and left the hospital room.

.....

She's still a weird nurse.

But, well, right.

I guess I was a little cheered up.

Well, it's as usual. I can't move forward or backward or anywhere else without someone pushing me from behind.

Now then.

This time it's my turn to show off.

Let’s settle the usual nonsense.

Slowly, I got out of bed.

The pain in my chest.

It's fine, I can still walk if I’m careful.

It's not a problem as long as I avoid strenuous exercise.

"……Isn’t it enough already?"
I’ve had enough of dying.
It’s time to start living soon.

It’s already the 30th of September.
There’s only a little until the end of it all.

After changing clothes and sneaking out of the hospital, I decided to take a taxi to the apartment. There's no subways, buses, or trains that run close to it, and it’s too great of a distance to walk home. I also didn't have the luxury of time. Sumiyuri Academy, the place the fox-masked man designated as the location of the party, should still be quite a long distance away. Last time I went there (of course, the academy wasn’t in ruins at that point, it still operated normally), I was in the passenger seat of Aikawa-san's car, and I was also unconscious for half of the ride, so I didn't know how long it would take. But still, I was certain that it would take a few hours to get there with Miiko-san's Fiat.

I had to hurry.

That being said, I couldn't really head there directly as it would be way too reckless to go empty handed. I can't be that bold. I haven’t reached that point. That's why I needed to return to the apartment.

"....."

You might think this is trivial at a time like this, but using a taxi in Kyoto is, well, humiliating.....

I arrived at the apartment.

As one would expect, I put my guard up.

The wound on my chest was throbbing.

Well, I think Houko-chan and Moeta-kun left for Sumiyuri Academy long ago, but I still couldn’t avoid being tense.

If they find out that I had slipped out of the hospital, I could get killed for real this time.....

Scary scary.

I entered the apartment’s premises while being cautious of my surroundings. I went up to the second floor, careful not to make any noise as the floor creaked. The only people living upstairs are me and Miiko-san, and since she’s in the hospital

right now, I didn't need to worry about what was ahead.

I unlocked the door and went into my room.

In my house for the first time in three days, huh.....

Well, it hasn't been long enough for me to get nostalgic about it and I didn't have time for that anyways. And, of course, it wasn't a fitting situation. If I didn't hurry with my preparations, it would be too late.

The weapons I have are...

Since I shot the rest of the Jericho bullets last month, it was no good. If I had the time, I could have gotten some more ammo, but.....

So I'm limited to just the knives, huh.

The thin-bladed knife and the lock-picking knife.

The thin-bladed one came with a holster.

"Hmm....."

I'm somewhat uneasy. These are knives that I've been using for a long time, but that's not very reliable. Even if I only had knives, I'm not Zerozaki, so they would only be a bother.....

Suddenly, I looked at the wall.

Or rather, the next room.

"Hmm....."

Right, I should borrow Miiko-san's expandable baton. I'm sure there are some Japanese swords among the antiques that I could use, but unfortunately I'm not used to handling swords, including wooden ones. As long as I didn't use the baton as a sword, I'd be able to handle it. Even if I don't use it as a weapon, a baton can't be that bothersome.

After leaving my room, I went to Miiko-san's room and unlocked it with the lock-picking knife and, after apologizing for the intrusion, entered. The layout of the room was the same, and I've been in this room a few times, so I knew what I was doing. Well, even if I knew what I was doing, I still felt guilty for entering without permission, but it was an emergency situation, and it wasn't like I was here to do anything to be guilty over.

"Ah, that's right."

Since it's a good time, let's borrow something from Hime-chan's room too.

I paid the rent for that room two months in advance, so Hime-chan's room should still be as it was last left since it hasn't yet been rearranged. I wanted to borrow Hime-chan's famous *strings*. Of course, using string techniques is something that's far from possible for me, but *strings* are way more practically useful than a baton.

However, there's Nanananami on the first floor.....

At this time.....

I would appreciate it if she were at university.

I locked Miiko-san's room and went downstairs. Tiptoeing past Nanananami's room, I made it to Hime-chan's room. I snuck in (feeling like a petty thief) and rummaged around the small room that felt even smaller with the bed.

It wasn't long before I found what I was looking for.

Like that, I was ready to go.

This should probably be enough.

".....Why is this happening two months in a row?"

I emptied the contents of my bag on Hime-chan's bed and rearranged them. If I positioned things in an easy to access way, it would count when the time came. Last month, I only had to deal with one person, but this month, it's against thirteen people.....

One and thirteen is completely different.

Well.....

I just need to repeat the same thing thirteen times.

Repeating things is my speciality.

Even if it's involuntary, it's my specialty.

"There. That should suffice."

Now my luggage was ready. All I had to do now was put on my holster and then my jacket and I'd be done. Because of the season, I've been wearing only shirts these days, but without a jacket the holster would be completely visible and uncool. Well

then, now to return to my room one last time.

And when I turned around.

"....."

Someone came into the room.

There was no sign of the door opening or closing.

They were standing right behind me.

For a moment, I thought it was Nanananami, so I prepared my knife.

But I was wrong.

That wasn't the case.

"I have brought..."

She.

Chiga Hikari-san spoke.

"Some clothing."

"....."

There was a jacket in her arms.

My jacket.

"Is something the matter?"

"No....."

I put the knife away, shifted my posture, sat down on the bed, and turned my head to face the small statured woman, whose eyes were almost even to mine.

Hikari-san.....

It looks like she noticed everything.

Then...

"...You must be fed up, right?"

"I am not really fed up or anything."

Hikari-san smiled gently.

"I think it's typical of you."

"Typical of me, huh....."

It sounded self-deprecating, even if it was unintentional.

"You know, Hikari-san, I've been told by your little sister, Teruko-san, that guys like me would be better off dead. That people living with a frightening monster inside them are too selfish."

"……Oh my," Hikari-san smiled bitterly as if it couldn't be avoided. "Well, Teruko has her own way of thinking."

"Teruko-san's way of thinking…..?"

"That girl was probably jealous of you."

"Jealous? Of who? Me?"

"Or perhaps envious," Hikari-san said. "Either way, I guess Teruko didn't recognize that you and her are of the same kind."

"Same kind, huh….."

An alternative, you could say

Certainly.

Teruko-san and I were able to get through to each other.

At the very least, unilaterally from my side.

"Well, it seems like I'm similar to everyone else. But if you want to talk about people who are the same kind as me, there's only a demonic killer. I wonder where he is now……."

"You are only you."

Hikari-san, for some reason, said with a strong and harsh tone that I had never heard from her before.

"There's no replacement for you anywhere. That's why there's no one of your kind anywhere."

"……Then it's fine."

If that's the case, it's fine.

If that's the case, then it would have been nice.

I mumbled to myself, powerlessly.

I became somewhat timid.

As I thought, it's no good.

I'm being spoiled.

When there's a sweet person in front of me, I end up wanting to be spoiled.

In a sense.

She was the person I shouldn't have met, even more so than

Nanananami.

Chiga Hikari.

"In April, when I left that island..." I said. "Iria-san asked me to stay. That was the first time I was invited. Staying on the island and becoming a family."

"A family....."

"I should have done that. I should have cut all ties with this side and retired. If I had done that, at the very least, I wouldn't have bothered the people in this apartment anymore."

I wouldn't have caught the eyes of the worst.

I wouldn't have made the Story go mad.

Even if it went mad, it wouldn't have been to this point.

Not to this point.

"Even if you did that, I think the result would've been the same. Maybe the progression would've been a bit slower?" Hikari-san rejected my thinking. "The previous owner of this room, if I remember correctly, was Yukariki Ichihime?"

".....She was. Did Aikawa-san tell you about that?"

"A little. Her nickname was Hime-chan or something?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Himena Maki-san too. It seems she had the same nickname she had when she was a child."

"Eh?"

"**Hime-chan**."

Hikari-san seemed to be enjoying herself a bit.

"If you were there when Himena-san was killed, you would have surely had the same reaction as you did when Yukariki-san was killed, wouldn't you?"

"....."

That person, I hated her.

I really hated her.

I really hated her, but.

Even then, if she were to die in front of me.

At that time, probably.

I'm sure.

I wouldn't have stayed as I was.

"Then the place you're in is the same."

Maki-san.

She had confirmed that her own death would happen two years later.

Then that's just what it is.

In the end, I...

Even if I were able to make the Story go mad,

No matter how much I accelerated it,

Stopping it,

And escaping it is impossible.

Is that how it is?

Are you saying that's how it is?

Maki-san.

She didn't tell me anything.

That's because, in the end, she understood.

That no matter how much she struggled, nothing would change.

But.....

No, but.

But that's why.

Even she.

Couldn't foresee what would happen after her death.

I see. I realized it too late.

Now, without a prophet, it's completely unknown territory for everyone.

From here on out, it really can't be read.

The fox-masked man created such a situation.

The motive for killing Maki-san, was that it?

It wasn't exactly a lie to say that it would've been annoying to be told where the Story is going, but that wasn't the primary objective. That's because, even if you could say that she could see the end of the world, the end of the Story, you could definitely not say that **she could read it**.

The fox-masked man, by killing Maki-san...

He brought chaos to the Story.

Just like when I was plunged into chaos.

When Hime-chan was killed.

"It's not unrelated to Himena-san's murder, is that what you meant when you said those words that day?"

"Well, that's about it."

"...Is that so. how should I put this... you know, Hikari-san, I'm just a regular, dull, useless guy that can't be saved, but there used to be a time where I wasn't like that....."

"What do you mean you weren't like that?"

"I was more of a cool, dry, twisted brat who wouldn't lift a finger for anyone else...."

"Certainly, I can imagine that."

"I'm laughable, right? You're fed up with me, aren't you? Right now I'm pushing through a chest injury for Miiko-san's sake. I'm moving towards a certain death. Forgetting the life I led, forgetting who I was, and moving for the sake of other people. After having hurt a lot of people, I'll try to help at least one. Though, I say helping, but it was my fault in the first place. Saying words of self-sacrifice even though I don't know my place. Really, I must surely look extremely pathetic."

"I don't think so," Hikari-san said. "I don't think you're such a cold-hearted person towards others. First of all, isn't that the case for Tomo-san?"

"About Kunagisa, again, it's my fault..." I answered. "Also, being next to Kunagisa doesn't have to be my role in particular. Kunagisa just needed someone, it's not like she needed me specifically. That's why I **took advantage** of that."

"That may be so," Hikari-san nodded. "But apart from you, who could be besides Tomo-san?"

"....."

"I'm sure no one else other than you could have loved Kunagisa Tomo. You were able to save her because you were you."

Hikari-san calmly said.

Still with a strong and stern voice.

"If you've forgotten, then try remembering. You were always working for someone else, weren't you?"

"……Eh?"

"In April, you did your best for Sonoyama-san, me, and Tomo-san. I heard about what happened afterwards from Kasugai-san. In May, for your classmate Emoto-san. In June, for Yukariki Ichihime. In July, again, or rather, as always, for Tomo-san's sake. And last month too."

"……"

"You're always moving for the sake of someone around you. You get hurt for the sake of someone else. You get injured so that others won't get hurt. There might be people who can't stand to see that because it's so painful, but I want to keep watching you. I think you're wonderful. That's why, certainly, as you say, you may be laughable and I may be fed up with you, but no matter how much you pretend to be troubled..."

"...There's no way that such a wonderful person would do nothing in this situation."

I.

Took my luggage and stood up.

Hikari-san spread the jacket and walked behind me, making my arms go through the sleeves. Her movements were so smooth, I didn't feel any hesitation.

I swear.

You're the best maid.

The maid among maids.

I can't be satisfied with other maids anymore.

She makes me quiver.

"No, that's not the case at all."

Hikari-san walked around to face me, fixed the details of

my clothes, and then took two steps back, distancing herself from me.

"You can buy my loyalty with money."

"....."

"However, your courage is irreplaceable. Have pride in yourself. It’s only been a short time, but I feel honored to have been able to serve someone like you."

Then.

Hikari-san grabbed the ends of her skirt.

And bowed deeply.

"Please be safe, master. I’ll wait for your return."

"I’m off!"

To that strength that certainly wasn't weakness,

To that kindness that certainly wasn't softness,

I turned my back.

And stepped out into the apartment's hallway.

The creaking hallway.

The dim hallway.

I took up residence in this apartment shortly after I dropped out of the ER program and came back to Japan.

It was Miiko-san's recommendation.

For Miiko-san, the people living here are like family, that's what Suzunashi-san said.

Honestly, I don't really understand what a family is. The only person I’m close enough to call them family is Kunagisa.

But this place has a nice atmosphere.

If Miiko-san wasn't here, it would crumble.

Everyone would be sad.

Even Ukigumo-san, even Hime-chan.

I can't do something like that.

I can't forgive something like that.

That reminds me.

It seems the Zerozaki clan was a group that placed family bonds above anything else, but that would mean that demonic killer, Zerozaki Hitoshiki... I wonder if he ever felt like that.

I feel like he may have, or maybe not.

Once more.

If I could meet him once more.

I'd like to ask him about his family.

I don't think I'll ever see him again, and I don't want to, but considering my past experience, it seems that in most cases when I think I'll never see someone again, I end up reuniting with them. So even if the theory of Zerozaki Hitoshiki's death is true, I felt that I might end up meeting him again soon.

For that.

First, I need to survive through this September.

Exiting the apartment, I walked towards the parking lot.

And.

There were two people on the side of the road.

One on the right, one on the left.

In the dusk, with the sun still up, as if they were waiting for me, two people were on the sidewalk.

One was a young boy with droopy eyes. With long legs and a thin waist, it was a stature that looked balanced and agile. He was wearing green work clothes, as if he had just come home from a part-time job. Letting his black bangs hang and with both hands in his pockets, he was smoking a cigarette.

And the other one was a girl with a bowl cut.

A pure white dress and even whiter skin. Only her lips were strangely red. With an awfully cold gaze, as if looking down on someone, she was glaring at me.

"Moeta-kun... Houko-chan."

Ishigami Moeta and Yamiguchi Houko.

Having deserted the *Killing Names*,

They were now residents of the rundown apartment.

So they still haven't headed towards the school ruins.

Vigilance.

Naturally, my legs stopped.

My chest throbbed.

My wound ached.

The heavy silence weighed on me.

"You don't need to worry, Ii-nii."

Moeta-kun said with a beautiful voice that softened the mood.

"Houko will not raise her hands against you anymore because you formed a loyalty contract. She can't touch you, and she has no say in what you do."

"Loyalty.....?"

"The *Yamiguchi* are extremely specialized assassins that can only use their killing abilities for their master's sake. They can't move without making a contract with someone."

Ah, come to think of it, Izumu-kun told me something like that. And as I recall, when I was stabbed by Houko-chan, she said something like that while she was holding my head in her arms.

I see, so that was something necessary for Houko-chan to *move*.

Needing a *master* to exert their *power*.

A loyalty contract.

Only for someone's sake.

They can only exert their power for someone else's sake.

"For Houko-chan, it must have been unexpected for you to regain consciousness so quickly, but while Ii-nii was unconscious, she could move freely without being restrained by you."

"I lacked awareness," Houko-chan mumbled in a disgusted voice as if she was clicking her tongue. "I should've shown no mercy and aimed at a vital spot."

"........No, it seems it was a lethal wound."

"I should've aimed for the heart."

"I would've died."

The stabbing, was it necessary?

At least, for Houko-chan.

Scary.....

I wonder if that was not only to *stop* me, but also to break

the shackles that would inevitably bind her, even if only while I was in the hospital.

Using such ridiculous subterfuge all of a sudden.....

To me, who didn't know the circumstances, it was an act impossible to understand.

"Anyway," Moeta-kun said. "It was Houko-chan's mistake to have made a loyalty contract that involves her whole life with someone close. She also misjudged Ii-nii's toughness and now she can't stop you from acting."

"Can not....."

"Total submission."

"Submission....."

I looked at Houko-chan.

Houko-chan glared at me with a "Tch."

Total submission.....

It somehow made my heart pound.

"Houko-chan."

".....Yes. What is it, Onii-chan."

"Say woof."

"....."

Houko-chan shivered for a moment and then, with her usual expression, as if it wasn't anything special,

".....woof."

She said.

Her cool expression was only on the exterior, though.

Her body was trembling with embarrassment.

She bit her lips and tears appeared in her eyes.

.....Somehow, I felt like I was finished as a person.

Human Failure, Nonsense User.

It's not like she obeys me with enthusiasm.....

"Fufu."

Moeta-kun chuckled as if he was enjoying himself.

It seems he was angry.

"Anyway, that's why if Ii-ni wants to go somewhere, she can't stop you. The only thing Houko can do is help you with all

her might to ensure that you stay safe and unharmed"

"……What about you?"

I asked.

"Moeta-kun, you don't have any such restraints, do you? After all, you're a G*rim Reaper*. Also, you shouldn't have waited for me here, you could have gone in advance by yourself."

"Neither I nor Houko know the location of Sumiyuri Academy," Moeta-kun said nonchalantly. "We need you to guide us there and, of course, we have no means of transportation. A fifteen year old and a thirteen year old have no means of getting around. Being a kid is impractical. Ah, we're troubled, troubled."

"About that……"

You could've done something about that.

If it's you two, you could've done something.

Houko-chan, looking very displeased, changed the target of her glaring to Moeta-kun and said, "Moeta said we should wait for Onii-chan until the last moment."

"Even though I said it's dangerous. Moeta, if Onii-chan gets more hurt than now, what will you do?"

"……."

If I may calmly interject, the danger of what Houko-chan did to me was first class, surpassing any experience that I've ever had, but, well, this wasn't the kind of atmosphere where I could say that.

"Houko, you know…"

Moeta-kun smiled broadly.

His personality seems to be quite bad.

Even if they were only half-siblings, he was a boy beautiful enough to make one's blood freeze, but unlike Houko-chan, Moeta-kun already had a certain kind of narrow-mindedness about him that didn't inspire desire for protection.

"I like Ii-nii and Mii-nee from the bottom of my heart. I love them."

"Then---"

"Houko and I have different ways of loving things. Houko values the things that she loves, but I can only love the things that I value. That's something we talked a lot about yesterday, didn't we?"

"....."

"I won the bet. I'm the one that believed Ii-nii would come back. No, I knew it," Moeta-kun said as if inviting me. "I've been waiting impatiently for you, Ii-nii."

".....Thanks for waiting."

"Of course, after all of this," Houko-chan turned and looked at me with half desperate eyes. "'I'm going alone, don't follow me,' you won't say something like that, right?"

"You're doing this for Miiko-san, right?"

I.

I took one step forward with my feet that had come to a stop.

I moved to pass between them.

"If it's not for me, do as you like."

I advanced without looking back.

But those footsteps.

"...As you wish."

One.

"I intended to do that from the beginning."

Two overlapped.

Without exchanging words,

Without even confirming with each other,

Keeping the same pace, we walked.

Yamiguchi Houko.

Ishinagi Moeta.

And the Nonsense User.

The three of us are aligned, huh.

No, one more.

It’s about time.

Even that late entering person.

Won't miss this timing.

Now should be the limit.

I swear, they’re teasing me.

But if they’re going to show up, this is the only time to do it.

If they miss, then they’re not that person to begin with.

Turning the corner, we arrived at the parking lot.

In the untaken space between Miiko-san’s Fiat 500 and my Vespa, a vintage model, where I was stabbed in the chest the day before yesterday, it was parked.

A dazzlingly bright red and streamlined form.

A stylish convertible.

"……"

"……"

"……"

No one said anything.

Without looking between us, instinctively, we advanced towards that convertible.

I went around the right side and took the passenger seat.

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun took the back seats.

We got in and closed the door.

The engine was still on.

With a glance, I checked the driver’s seat.

I didn't need to confirm, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

Neat red hair reaching her shoulders. A wine red suit, with the shirt around her chest. A short skirt and comically long legs that wouldn't fit without moving the seat back. She had an appearance that could only be described as beautiful, but she emitted a dangerous charm, with deep red sunglasses that made it impossible to see her eyes.

Just being there made me feel overpowered.

An absolute feeling of intimidation.

That presence.

"Dear client, where to?"

Saying that, she smiled cynically.
Humanity's Strongest Contractor.
It was Aikawa Jun’s arrival.
Trying to look cool, I answered her.
"With you, anywhere we can."

0

Creation before destruction.
Burial before collapse.
Faith on the right, balance on the left.
Charade in light, foundation in shadow.
Grief for someone else,
Hatred for them.

1

"Fufun. I see. So in other words, that bastard, Kino Raichi, is like Purple Haze, right?"

"No, you don't need to express it with Stands....."

Is that so easy to understand?

Aikawa-san went full speed from the get go.

From the passenger's seat, I was explaining to Aikawa-san, who was in the driver's seat, what had happened so far, but she didn't seem too surprised.

"........Are you by chance already aware of the current situation?"

"Mm. I heard the gist of it from Kouta."

"Kouta-san, huh......."

But I hadn't told anything to Kouta-san.

Though that person is ill natured, so she must have deduced that I knew something from when we talked in the hospital room and when I stopped her at the last moment, so it's no surprise that she investigated my surroundings.

That being said.

I see, Kouta-san kept her promise.

"Ahaha. But I didn't know she loved me that much."

"I had noticed, though."

"You're perceptive when it comes to others, Ii-tan. Hey, Houko-chan, don't you think so too?"

Aikawa-san turned around to the back seats (even though she was driving). Even Houko-chan wasn't brazen enough to fall asleep under these circumstances even though she was in a vehicle. Sitting right behind Aikawa-san, she looked surprised when suddenly called out to.

"Yes."

She answered.

They heard about her a few times from me, but now that I think about it, this is the first time they've met Aikawa-san. Of course, when I spoke, I didn't know of their lineage, but for Houko-chan and Moeta-kun who are *Killing Names*, *Humanity's Strongest Contractor*, the *Death Colored Crimson*, Aikawa Jun should be an existence that holds a great meaning (that was even the case for Izumu-kun).

Even then, Moeta-kun seemed awfully carefree and was enjoying the air in the open car, well, that's probably a problem with his personality, but Houko-chan seemed a little tense. She already introduced herself, but it doesn't seem like she broke the ice at all and, of course, Aikawa-san doesn't care about such things.

"It's a real disaster that Houko-chan chose such a thick headed man as her master."

"Yes. Exactly as you say."

"How about it? Won't you switch to me now? It'd be better if the person you serve is cool, right?"

"No. No matter how half assed, thickheaded, and unsociable a person Onii-chan is, it's not something I can do anything about on my own."

"....."

I thought about having her say woof one more time.

It was a dangerous and sweet temptation.

Even though they're both girls younger than me, unlike Hime-chan, Houko-chan has been beating me up until now.....

Well, neither Houko-chan nor Moeta-kun seemed to be hostile to Aikawa Jun, unlike Izumu-kun, so that was good. I didn't want to have my pace disturbed now.

"If Aikawa Jun is on our side..."

Moeta-kun joined the conversation.

"...It already feels like an easy win. At this rate, it looks like I'll be able to do it easily. I still have part-time work tomorrow, so I welcome having as much spare energy as possible."

Umm.....

That was someone who had never done something with Aikawa-san speaking. It's true that working together with her makes things a piece of cake, but it's safe to assume that your exhaustion level will increase by a factor of three or four. It's inevitable that you'll not have a shred of energy left.

It's a card too dangerous to use freely.

Too sharp to be a trump card.

I can't say that in this case, though.

"But Sumiyuri Academy, huh. I thought I'd never go back there again. It's quite twisted to use that place as your headquarters, I swear..."

"....."

"...That shitty father."

After sighing, Aikawa-san laughed it off.

"I finally found him."

"Found him, you say..."

So then does this mean that for a little over a month, Aikawa-san has been searching for her father, that fox-masked man, all this time? Is that why she disappeared and couldn't be found?

"After asking Izumu-kun about the fox-masked man, Aikawa-san..."

"It's Jun. Don't call me by my last name. Though, that being said, it feels like it's been a long time since we last did this bit. Okay, go on."

".....So, Jun-san, ever since then, you've been searching for

that fox-masked man?"

"No, I've been looking for that asshole for a long time. The fox-masked man, that's the first time I've ever heard that fancy name. And no matter how much I searched, I couldn't find him. To think that he would disguise himself."

"Eh....."

A disguise, does she mean that mask?

.....No way, right.....?

"Well, I half expected it, but you two don't seem to be as close as a parent and child."

Because ten years ago.

Considering what Saitou Takashi probably did during his second trip to America, the answer is obvious. It's easy to imagine that they wouldn't be so intimate.

"You know, Ii-tan, he was..."

Aikawa-san said.

"...The worst."

"....."

"If you've already heard, I'm going to repeat it, but I have three fathers. No, I had three. Even though one went down, then two, then three, one was left."

"If I remember correctly, all three of them..."

"Yeah. **I killed them**."

For being a confession of murder, of parricide, it was too light.

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun didn't react.

Of course.

These siblings have thrown away their parents.

"What happened ten years ago, it's not a past I've often disclosed. At that time, I wasn't yet the strongest and of course I wasn't a contractor. I was just a tool for those three."

"A tool... not a daughter?"

"A daughter and a tool," Aikawa-san said cynically. "Well, even then, what I do hasn't changed much since then. Taking a lot of jobs under the will of that asshole of a father."

"....."

"It pissed me off, so I killed all three of them. Well, that's about it, that’s the connection between me and him."

It’s not something that simple, is it?

It’s not something that can be settled with such simple words.

I know it.

I **know it very well**.

".....You’re not his real daughter?"

"I'm not. Our ages wouldn't match, right?"

"I don't necessarily think they wouldn't match."

Saitou Takashi is currently thirty nine years old.

Aikawa-san is probably in her twenties.

It shouldn't be impossible.

"Your faces look somewhat alike, too."

For her to just be an orphan or a foundling is impossible.

As a setting, it’s impossible.

"Of course they do."

Aikawa-san said.

"Because I'm the daughter of his big sister."

".....Sister?"

If I remember correctly, Takashi Saitou.

He had two twin sisters, right?

The two sisters who went missing.

"Though it's not clear which of the sisters it was. That’s why that asshole picked me up. He's a horrible siscon bastard."

"So that's the circumstances."

Though I say that's the circumstances, it's probably not just that. I'm sure that ten years ago, and even ten years before that, there must have been a long and rich story about Saitou Takashi and his surroundings and Aikawa Jun and her surroundings that can’t be told in the middle of a trip like this.

The story will probably never be told.

It’s not my place to hear it.

I can’t go that far.

After all, it’s a family matter.

"I knew he wasn’t the kind of guy who’d drop dead that easily and it’s as I thought. I thought he was living somewhere from the start, but I was surprised to see the Niounomiya siblings under his control. Though, that’s typical of him."

"....."

It’s just.

Some worries still remained.

Worries. Now that Aikawa Jun has finally found her father, how will she act? Against her father, will she be able to be like with everyone else, will she be the strongest?

It’s someone that she’s already killed before.

It's a complicated issue.

"It's thanks to Ii-tan."

"Eh?"

"That I can meet my father."

"……Why?"

"If it weren’t for Ii-tan, I probably would never have met him. Because ten years ago, I completely severed the connection between us. Ii-tan's talent of gathering weirdos came in handy in an unexpected way."

"…..Thanks for that, I'm glad to be of use for you."

"I’ve moved around a lot in the past month, I’ve been to America, I’ve traveled halfway around the world, but in the end, being with Ii-tan was the best thing for me. I thought being found by Kouta was a good opportunity, so I came back."

"But why did you go into hiding? If you wanted to look for him, there were other ways to do it, right? Like relying on Kunagisa or relying on *Chii-kun*. Or keeping a watch on me from the beginning."

"I couldn't tell all that just from what Izumu said. If I knew that you had been *nominated* by that asshole, I would’ve just kept an eye on you right from the start."

"…….Right."

We travelled single-mindedly on the highway.

Since we were basically going away from the center of the town, the highway was virtually empty. Seeing the break in the conversation, Moeta-kun interjected with a "but" from the back.

"Are you sure it's going to be okay, Jun-san?"

"Hmm? What is it, pretty boy?"

"I certainly welcome the easygoing mood, but the way you're talking about it makes me a little nervous. You, Aikawa Jun-san..."

I turned back and looked at Moeta-kun.

He was smiling broadly and seemed to be enjoying himself.

Certainly, he seemed a bit uneasy.

"...**You just want to see your dad, don't you**?"

"....."

"The causality that fell apart, the link that was severed. If you've been in hiding for the past month in the interest of reconnecting with him, then I'm truly sorry, but I'm going to have to go off on my own without you. I don't want to be held back."

"...You're quite unreserved with your words against this strongest contractor, pretty boy," Aikawa-san said as if she was truly having fun from the bottom of her heart. "Aren't you tired of using that kind of language at your age? If you're annoyed with me, you can just speak casually."

"That's just how I am."

"Is that your wisdom?"

"Something like that," Moeta-kun nodded. "Houko-chan and I don't have any words concerning our father. That's why, for that reason, you and I are incompatible. And in the first place, I'm not interested in that fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi or whatever. I don't care about him. The one I'm interested in is only the man Ii-nii talked about earlier, Kino Raichi. He's probably the one holding the antidote."

"....."

"If you're a contractor, I'd prefer it if you don't put your

personal feelings into it. What I'm trying to say is that's the source of my unease."

"Huh." Aikawa-san burst out in laughter. "I know. Do I look like the kind of fool who'd put personal matters in her work?"

No.....

I think you've been constantly putting them in so far.....

"The reason I was searching for that shitty father, pretty boy..."

Aikawa-san said.

"Is because this time I'll kill him for good."

"....."

"Don't worry, the mood of an easy victory won't waver, pretty boy. In this world, and even in other worlds, there's been plenty of people other than him that've been called the worst, but the only one called the strongest is me, Aikawa Jun."

Moeta-kun.

Hearing that, he shrugged.

".....It was an impolite question. Please forget it."

"Thanks."

As the one in between them, I felt a little anxious, but Aikawa-san didn't seem to mind it that much. Well, if I were to make an unnecessary retort, the frequency at which the strongest and the worst are used in idioms is completely different, so I think that using that for a comparison is fundamentally wrong, but I won't say such tactless things.

"Ah, but, Aikawa-san."

"Jun."

".....Jun-san, about the *Thirteen Stairs*, the name of one of Jun-san's other fathers, Kajou Akira, was in there too."

"Huuh?"

Aikawa-san looked surprised.

I explained to Aikawa-san in detail about each of the *Thirteen Stairs* that I had failed to mention earlier. Of course, clearly enough so that the two in the back could also understand. Though this would be the second time I'm telling it to Houko-chan and of course Moeta-kun probably heard about it from her, but still, just in case.

"The *Thirteen Stairs*, huh. Be it the Phantom Troupe or the GUNG-HO-GUNS, I don't know what he respects, but there's too many weirdos among the members." After hearing everything, Aikawa-san made a bitter smile. "That guy, he's still the same in that area. Of course, because he's still pursuing the same goal....."

The goal he's pursuing. The goal he's chasing.

The end of the world.

The end of the Story.

"But Ii-tan, you don't need to worry about Kajou Akira. He's dead for sure."

"Dead....."

"I can assure that, concerning him."

"You killed him, right?"

Killed.

Murder.

Killed someone.

Killed someone killed someone killed someone.

...Calm down.

Accept it.

It's something from long ago.

It's not something that should shake me.

"No..." But then, Aikawa-san muttered something. "...To be precise, the one who killed him was my other father, Aikawa Junya, but, well, I was the one who killed him about halfway and I also confirmed it. Of course, it's not something that Izumu-kun would know, but I'm a related party. I couldn't be any more related, so I can assert that. Kajou Akira is dead."

"But in the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"It's probably what's called a retired number."

Aikawa-san said sarcastically.

"Kajou Akira was the only existence that couldn't be replaced for that asshole. Even more than his best friend Aikawa Junya, Kajou Akira was the one and only to him."

"....."

Hmm. I was still only halfway convinced.

I felt faintly uncomfortable.

Aikawa-san has three fathers.

That's what I heard from Hikari-san.

And the person in question admitted that too.

So you can see that as an objective fact, but so far Aikawa-san has only called the fox-masked man *father*. She hasn't shown any sign of this for the other two. In reality, she only calls her *uncle* with whom she shares a real blood relationship her dad. That's probably because he's the closest existence to her in terms of blood, but she doesn't even show such treatment towards Aikawa Junya from whom she inherited her name. Isn't there something off about that?

Honestly, I felt Moeta-kun's worry too.

Hypothetically.

Hypothetically, if there was a possibility that **the strongest and the worst would open their hearts to each other**, that really would be too much to handle, wouldn't it?

Aikawa-san, she's been searching for Saitou Takashi for the past month. Not just this past month, she's been looking for a long time. Probably since right after she killed him ten years ago, she's been searching for him.

If that's the case.

If she has some feelings like that.

It's enough to make me feel some worry.

Aikawa-san.

I wonder if my fears are getting through to her.

"Basically, Ii-tan, ten years ago my three fathers had a falling out."

"Huh..."

"My shitty father and I had a fight and Aikawa Junya became my ally. Kajou Akira sided with Saitou Takashi, so it became a two versus two family fight."

"And..."

"I was the only survivor." As if she was reminiscing about those days, Aikawa-san had a nostalgic expression. "At that time, I was also listed as dead as a matter of fact. I didn't have a name back then, so I took Aikawa Junya's name."

"So that's why?"

That's why she hates being called by her last name?

I thought it was just a weird habit, so I called her by her last name just for the fun of it, but I see, having heard that, it made sense.

"You, so you really were doing it on purpose....."

Aikawa-san's voice had an intense gravity.

It seems she read my mind.

"Well, setting that aside."

I forcefully change the subject.

"You didn't have a name?"

"It's not that I didn't have one. I was called a lot of things by a lot of people. Most of the aliases they call me now are just remnants of that time. Each of them has no style to them, so I don't like them, but I was called Eagle the most."

"Eagle?"

"Because Aikawa Junya was Hawk."

"Oh, an eagle and a hawk.

"In this case, we're both hawks," Aikawa-san said. "I learned how to fight from Aikawa Junya."

"....."

"Well, Aikawa Junya was the one who did the most father-like things for me. He always stood by my side in the end."

Even while saying that.

She won't call that person father?

Or maybe that's just how it is.

Or maybe that's not how it is.

Someone else's family.

It's not something I can comment on.

"Are you bad with people without names?"

".....No, even if it's just an alias, it's fine. When you get right down to it, names are just symbols. It's just that, you know, symbols for the sake of symbols that aren't expected to be called by anyone from the start are my weakness. A symbol without meaning is still fine, but if it has no meaning as a symbol, then it's honestly tough. It's just like noise."

"....."

"Words don't get through."

Well, it can't be helped.

It's natural for the other side to have that degree of countermeasures.

Rather, thinking about the current situation, I should see it as an advantage that one of the steps of the *Thirteen Stairs* was filled just to face me.

I'm not alone now

Yamiguchi Houko.

Ishinagi Moeta.

Aikawa Jun.

I have three reliable allies.

The *Thirteen Stairs* are no match.

"Hmm. But it bothers me that there are only twelve steps in the *Thirteen Stairs*. Isn't there some kind of secret number? That shitty dad always likes to hide the important things."

"I don't see the point in hiding it, though."

"Well, that's true. If that thirteenth person was **me**, it'd be a bit surprising."

"Could it unexpectedly be a seat left for you?" Moeta-kun said. "Regardless of what you think, there might still be some lingering attachment on your father's side."

"That's impossible."

Aikawa-san said.

"That asshole doesn't think anything about me."

"....."

"At any rate, he probably doesn't even think that I'll come. No, even if he did, it'd probably be the same."

".....Aikawa-san."

"Next time you call me that, I'll drop you on the highway."

"....."

Now that she knows I'm doing it on purpose, she's capable of anything.

While we were busy talking, we arrived at a familiar location. Well, that means that we've finally reached the halfway point to Sumiyuri Academy.

"By the way, I have a question not for you, but for the two in the back. How many of the names in the *Thirteen Stairs* are familiar to you? Honestly, I'm not that well informed about that world, so I don't know that many."

"I don't know much either. Though I'm a *Grim Reaper*, I haven't crossed a certain line," Moeta-kun answered. "However, Houko knows one, right?"

".....Yes," Houko-chan nodded. "Yamiguchi Nureginu. Though, I've never seen him in person. Even in the *Yamiguchi*, no one has ever seen Nureginu-san's appearance. Therefore, I can't give any advice."

"Is that so," Aikawa-san didn't show any dejection even after hearing that. "So in the end, that interference bastard, Noise, and Kino Raichi are the only two we know about clearly. There's also the matter of the identity of that fox-masked person in the yukata, but we'll just have to go with a haphazard approach."

"I guess," said Moeta-kun.

"I think so," said Houko-chan.

"Hmm. So if you remove Kajou Akira as well, there's only eleven people left in *Thirteen Stairs*, huh. Since there's four of us, let's see... I'll take care of nine."

Aikawa-san said.

"So, pretty boy and pretty girl, you take one each."

"....."

"....."

"Hmm? If you want, I don't mind taking care of all of them myself."

"No, that should be fine," Moeta-kun said. "Then my quota will be one person. If possible, I would prefer to be the one in charge of Kino Raichi, but I won't be too selfish. Houko too, are you fine with this?"

"……I'll only follow the will of Nonsense User Onii-chan," Houko-chan said. "If Onii-chan is fine with it, I don't mind."

"No, Houko-chan, even if you say that… uh… if there are eleven and you do one each…" Having the discussion swung to me, I counted on my fingers. "…….Huh? Um, Jun-san, then what should I do?"

"You're in charge of my shitty dad, of course."

Aikawa-san said, as if it were truly obvious.

"I hate to say it, but I'm not on his radar. Don't worry, that old bastard doesn't have any fighting skills. For you who did some martial arts, it should be a breeze."

"However…" Aikawa-san continued.

"If you can, save some for me."

"…….I'll try," nodding, I turned back to Houko-chan. "Then, Houko-chan, can I ask you to do that?"

"Understood," Houko-chan nodded. "As you wish, Onii-chan."

"....."

It kinda feels too formal.

It's probably a necessary ceremony for the *Yamiguchi*, but for myself, who was one-sidedly and quite harshly forced into a contract with her, I felt like I couldn't calm down in the current situation. Also, even if she said that she chose a nearby person because she didn't have the time, speaking seriously, I felt sorry for Houko-chan for making such a big contract with me. I wonder if there's something I could do……

Well, it's not something to think about right now.

"That being said, it looks like there's almost no combat oriented people in the *Thirteen Stairs*. Houko-chan's relative, Yamiguchi Nureginu, Miotsukushi Takami, and Miotsukushi Misora. For now, it's just those three and also Kino Raichi, I guess. For that samurai girl Asano, it took some time for the symptoms to take effect, but naturally he also possesses some fast acting poison too. Also, you should be careful of Tokinomiya."

"The Thought Manipulator, was it?"

"Yes. To be honest, because of some circumstances, I know a bit about those Tokinomiya guys. Well, they were harmless, so I let them be, but they're not the people you want to get involved with willingly. They're part of the *Cursing Names* just like Kino."

"……..Yeah."

I absolutely agree.

"Well, as far as Tokinomiya is concerned, as long as you keep your mind solid, you'll be fine. Since their *ability* is one that takes advantage of the weakness in a person's heart, their fear, as long as you don't feel fear, they can't use their *thought manipulation*."

"Then..."

Aikawa-san should have no problem. Moeta-kun and Houko-chan too, well, they should be fine. I've never heard those two describe something as *scary* before.

So is the problem with me then?

There's a bit of that.

Honestly.

There's a part of me that's terrified of the fox-masked man.

I've never felt as terrified of something as I am of that man.

Even though he hasn't done anything to me yet.

He's scary anyway.

"But you could take it the other way. These *Killing Names* and *Cursing Names* are fine as long as you're on the lookout for

them and although there's a difference between combatants and non-combatants, they're basically countermeasures against the enemy, but the problem is the rest of them, the ones **we don't understand**. The fact that we don't know about them might make them even worse," Aikawa-san said. "So... Space Creator, Imaginary Weapon, Doctor, Swordsmith, Puppeteer, and Dissonance, huh."

"Right."

"I don't get it."

"Right."

"Well, I don't think we have to worry about the doctor and the swordsmith. We've got a good idea of what they can do. I can imagine what their roles are. As for the puppeteer, well, I'm not so sure. I don't think he's just a puppet user, but if I were to have a guess, the problem would be the space creator and the imaginary weapon."

"Since their identities are unknown."

"I wonder if we can compare the space creator to Man In The Mirror."

"I don't think we can."

".....So we just have to do it unplanned, huh." Aikawa-san glanced at me and then looked at the two in the back. "Well then, prepare your guts, youngins."

"Houko and I are *combat focused*," Moeta-kun said. "This kind of situation is our speciality. The question will be how well we can make up for our lack of experience with our talents, but, well, I'll try to do my best to the point where I won't get tired."

"....."

Houko-chan was silent.

Umm... I'm still worried. Unlike Moeta-kun, Houko-chan acts cool, but she has a habit of doing her best until she collapses.

Thirteen years old.

Thinking about Shiogi-chan, Tamamo-chan, and Hime-chan, I think it's an age where one can fight sufficiently. If

we're bound by common sense, we won't get anywhere.

If possible, I'd like to do this without anyone getting injured.

On our side, of course.

But also on their side.

I don't want anyone to get hurt.

And more importantly, I don't want anyone to die.

Even if it's unreasonable.

If even one person dies.

I won't be able to face Miiko-san.

If someone were to get hurt for her sake in any shape or form, she probably won't accept it.

Whatever life it was.

She'd probably be deeply saddened.

I don't want to make her carry a cross like that.

If possible, I'd like to finish this without her knowing.

If you think that's hypocrisy, then it probably is.

However, if that is a sin, I will accept any punishment.

I won't change my mind about that.

As if it were a belief.

As if it were a creed.

I won't change my ways.

The only person who needs to get hurt is me.

I want to finish this without anyone else getting hurt.

But if Miiko-san doesn't want for me to get hurt, if it's like on that day when she protected me from Kino-san, if she wishes for that.

Then just this once, I'll stop getting hurt too.

We got off the highway.

From here, it should be a private road.

So it's about time.

Since the Sumiyuri Academy itself had already ceased operations, the road was deserted and there was not a single light. It was already *night*, so it was quite dangerous, but Aikawa-san didn't slow down even though we were off the highway.

Rather, she accelerated.

Is she in a hurry?

Because of her father.

"....."

"Ah, right, right, Ii-tan."

However, with an easygoing voice that had nothing to say, Aikawa-san spoke to me.

"You probably didn't notice, so Onee-san will teach you one thing."

"What?"

"I will t e l l y o u ★"

"No, even if you say it in an erotic way....."

"It's about Hikari."

"What about Hikari-san?"

"It's probably not Hikari."

"What?"

I was surprised.

"I haven't seen her directly, so I can't say for certain, but I think it was probably either Akari or Teruko. I think it was Teruko."

"Eh.....?"

Because they are triplets.

That kind of switching is entirely possible.

The difference between those three is the glasses and their personality.

You can remove glasses and you can play another person's character.

But.

"How can you say that? As you said, Jun-san, you didn't even see her, right?"

"Yeah. But I wouldn't be able to tell in person anyway. Because they're triplets. And as for their character, those three sisters are liars in the truest sense of the word."

"I know that too, but."

"Ii-tan can't even see it. I can't even see it. Of course, even those three's master, Iria, can't tell the difference between each one of them. So far, **there's only one person who can tell the three apart just by looking at them**."

"……**Ah**."

Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa Tomo... on that island, with one look, with just one glance, she could clearly distinguish between the three of them. With Kunagisa's terrific memory and recognition ability, she could tell the differences even if they were identical.

And.

That day when I met the fox-masked man in the underground parking lot, **Hikari-san didn't try to meet Kunagisa even though she was so close to her**.

That's because.

Hikari-san wasn't Hikari-san?

"But if that's true, then why? There's no reason to lie like that, is there?"

"Yeah. Thinking normally, that kind of lie is unnecessary. But **that's why**. If she wasn't Hikari but Akari or Teruko, then it's probably Teruko. That's what I think. You said that Hikari-san was **following you around**, right? In other words, **wasn't she guarding you**?"

I.

Without thinking, I looked back at Houko-chan.

Certainly, that was also the case for Houko-chan.

To protect me.

And in the first place, even though she's a maid, she has a seperate role from her two sisters. A bodyguard. A remarkable bodyguard that guards Akagami Iria's surroundings.

"Kasugai went to that island and told her about you, didn't

she? Hearing that, even though it's unfitting for her, Iria became worried, right? If that fortune teller who didn't look like she could die was killed and that made her think that something fishy was going on around Ii-tan, it wouldn't be surprising if **she wanted to do something for you**."

"....."

"You're making a face like that was unnecessary."

"No, but if that was the case, they could have said so from the beginning---"

"---If they had told you from the start, you would have refused. That's why you're making that face like it was unnecessary. Right, Houko-chan?"

".....Right. Certainly," Houko-chan nodded in response to Aikawa-san's question. "That's why I didn't say anything about it either."

"....."

I had no choice but to go silent.

"Actually, I think Houko-chan's and Teruko's guard was rather useful. After meeting Kino Raichi and being discharged, the only time that shitty dad was able to contact you was in Kunagisa's apartment, right? When Teruko couldn't possibly come along and Houko-chan was sleeping. Aside from that brief window, it was a solid guard, right? Like the strongest shield."

"....."

"Well, that bastard is impressive for not letting that tiny gap slip away."

In the end, I've never, not even once lived alone.....? Even though I said that it was unnecessary, that they shouldn't get involved, I might not have been able to live without that extra care.

Though it's different from gratitude.

There were some points to think about.

"Though it's a half baked theory close to slander and, in reality, Hikari may have really just been Hikari. But it's

interesting to think of it that way."

"Well, I guess that's true."

"Fufufu. The thought of that quiet and unfriendly Teruko-chan calling Ii-tan *master* and maintaining a smile while doing something like that even while hating it from the bottom of her heart makes Onee-chan a bit aroused."

"....."

I've had an inkling about this for a while now, but.....

This person is quite into women.

She might surprisingly get along with Suzunashi-san.

"Ii-nii."

I was called from behind.

It was Moeta-kun.

"Is that Sumiyuri Academy?"

".....Yeah."

Moeta-kun didn't even have to say it, we reached the point where we could see Sumiyuri Academy. Aside from the fact that it was quite massive, it wasn't that different from a normal school as far as the outside was concerned. It'll take some time before we get there, but finally.

There was no turning back.

Retreat had been out of the question for a while now.

And.

I didn't even feel like retreating.

Withdrawal was impossible.

".....Hmm."

Ah.

Then I realized.

I realized something rather important.

Right, that's right, why didn't I think of that earlier?

Aikawa Jun.

It's Aikawa Jun.

It's not just the fox-masked man that I saw that day at Kunagisa's apartment, I also met another person. **The woman without a name, the woman who wasn't anyone**. I had met her.

Her.

At that time, what did she say?

She said **she will become Aikawa Jun**.

Next, she will replace Aikawa Jun.

"....."

Impossible.....

This Aikawa-san... **is she a fake**?

Setting aside *her* thoughts and mannerisms, it's not possible to trace her shape and form. That's why she had to kill Sonoyama Akane on that island. So it shouldn't be hard to tell just by looking at her.....

However, if there is that one in a million chance.

Because of the subject of Hikari-san and Teruko-san earlier, it's hard to laugh away these suspicions.

Is there any way to check?

In this case, casually quizzing her about something that only Aikawa-san and I would know would be the clearest way, but if it's her, I'm sure she would've done that much research.

I'm in a bind.....

I know that it's not true, that it's not possible, but once you have your doubts, it becomes awkward. Such doubts will echo later on.

"Hey, Ii-tan."

Being called by Aikawa-san, I looked up in a hurry.

While I was thinking about such things, we'd already arrived at Sumiyuri Academy. We'd crossed the last line. The light from the headlights stretched far out and illuminated the school entrance.

The gate of that entrance was closed.

An iron door.

A huge, mighty-looking, iron door.

As if overlapping with that door, there was one figure.

A familiar standing figure.

It was Dissonance.

Noise-kun.

The light from the headlights.

You could see it from the other side.

He smiled.

Even at this distance, I understood that he smiled.

"Noise..."

I called his name.

I called his name, that wasn't his name.

The one without a name, I called him.

He was waiting for me at the school gates, just as he'd promised.

Waiting for us.

As our guide.

"Huh. I see, so that's Noise. The eleventh step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, huh. He looks pretty cute."

Saying that, Aikawa-san narrowed her eyes, confirming Noise-kun's appearance and position and...

Stepped on the gas pedal.

Accelerating even more.

Accelerating, Accelerating, Accelerating.

And arrived at the Academy's entrance in a blink.

Arrived and...

Crashed into it.

A roar.

A roar that made my body tremble.

Without slowing down at all, without stepping on the brakes the whole time, letting the momentum carry us through the iron door that seemed so sturdy, we crashed right into it.

Fragments of the shattered door flew back, grazing my cheeks, Moeta-kun's shoulders, and Houko-chan's head.

The entire car entered into the Academy and at that point, Aikawa-san finally pulled on the handle brake. Making a

beautiful round drift as if drawing a picture, the car did a 180° turn and faced the entrance from where we entered just a second ago, just destroying it rather than intruding through it.

Looking up at the sky.

Noise-kun was, along with a scream, flying through the air.

The flight duration exceeded five second.

And then, the landing.

Rather than a landing, it was just a fall, no.

A crash.

Squash. There was a horrible sound.

An awfully horrible sound.

"……Ouch……."

Even though I was wearing a seatbelt, it was too sudden for my body to handle the impact. It looked like it was the same even for Moeta-kun and Houko-chan who were in the back seats. Both of them had their posture broken.

Or rather.

Amazed.

Dumbfounded.

A voice couldn't be heard.

The three of us were completely speechless.

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun too.

This person…..

The things she does.

Even though this school was already in ruins, it's still not a good idea to destroy it out of the blue. It was too flashy to call it a surprise attack or even a preemptive strike. No matter how you looked at it, it was too much.

"Woo, we arrived!"

One person.

Aikawa-san was the only one who looked lively and unconcerned. She took off her seatbelt, got out of the car, and jogged towards Noise-kun, who had been blasted quite far.

And she checked his consciousness.

However…..

She didn’t need to get that close to confirm it. Even from this distance, it was obvious. He seemed to be convulsing and his eyes clearly turned white. No matter how you looked at it, he had retired.

Dissonance.

Dissonance had quickly disappeared.

Hah, it was too fast.....

"Errrr..."

Aikawa Jun turned back.

And facing us, grandiosely spread out her arms.

"With that, I only need to take care of eight more people, right? Or was it one? Or perhaps it was thirteen....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

"...Whatever."

Saying that, she smiled boldly.

Fearless and unrivaled.

This was the reason for why she is the strongest.

.....

I felt embarrassed for doubting her for even a second.

That's Aikawa Jun.

Without a doubt.

Another person who could do something that absurd doesn’t exist.

Shouldn't I have known from the beginning?

That there can’t be any fake Aikawa-san.

I should have known it.

Aikawa Jun is the real thing.

Though we weren't numerous, we decided to move in a formation just in case. Since I had come here with Aikawa-san three months ago and this place had some sort of connection with her, it wasn't exactly unknown territory. Even then, this place was quite different from when there were students *living here* and, in the first place, this academy was so complex that you can't grasp all of it just by coming here once or twice. It was like a maze or a labyrinth, there was no straightforward path. Probably the only person who could see the whole structure of the place from a bird's eye view was Shiogi-chan. Tamamo-chan and Hime-chan probably didn't even try to remember the routes.

Well, that's why we had a guide.

.....But now he's gone.

"Then I'll take the lead," said Moeta-kun. "I've been trained to detect traps and devices and since I was originally a *Grim Reaper*, I'm the best at sensing the location of people's souls."

"Hmm. If you say that much, I'll leave the front to the pretty boy and I'll take the back."

Said Aikawa-san.

"I'll block attacks from behind. I don't want to be getting in the way of the youngsters doing their best."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. After getting the first shot, I'm pretty satisfied with my work."

"....."

That's a problem, though.

Even though we can rely on her, if we do, our fatigue will just increase. In that sense, we can't just leave everything to Aikawa-san.

"Then Onii-chan and I will line up in the middle."

Said Houko-chan.

"So, in terms of shape, it'd be like a rhombus if you looked at it from above. Onii-chan is ambidextrous, right? Then since I'm right-handed, I'll go on the right and Onii-chan will take the left. Let's move in that formation."

"Yeah."

I said.

Rather, once the decision had been made, there was no room for my opinion.

"Then let's go."

Even though I said that, it's not like I had any idea where to go since there was no guide. I'm sure that the fox-masked man and the *Thirteen Stairs* are in this academy, but...

How should we search?

Even though I lost it right away, last time I had a map, but this time I didn't even have that.

"Well, in this case, there's no point in sitting still," Moeta-kun said. "They weren't very friendly to begin with, so thinking about it, we couldn't trust that guide from the start. In that sense, this situation isn't that bad."

"That's optimistic."

"In that case, it's not a good idea to be in a place with such a good view. If they have projectile weapons, we're done for. For now, let's enter the building. Even though it's like a maze, the four of us won't get lost or split up that easily."

"……..Hmm."

"Ii-nii, are you worried?"

"No, well, I don't want to wait quietly for them to come and find us and I honestly appreciate Moeta-kun's and Jun-san's idea, but it's just that it's out of character for me, so I'm complaining a bit. I'm not too worried."

"Is that so. And Houko?"

"If Onii-chan isn't worried, then I'm not either," Houko-chan said. "I don't mind doing what Moeta said."

"There's one more thing I'd like to add," Aikawa-san,

raising her hand. "Let's capture the next of the *Thirteen Stairs* that appears. There's quite a few things we'd like to ask and, if we're lucky, they might lead us to where that asshole is."

"....."

Are you really going to say that line?

For some reason, I glared at her.

She winked at me.

.....It's no good, we're of a different caliber.

"After coming all this way, there's probably no nonsense....."

Therefore.

We formed up as planned and went into the nearest building to the gate. The door wasn't locked, so there was no need to use my lock picking blade

It was dimly lit, or rather, completely dark. It seemed the place wasn't ventilated at all as the air was awfully stagnant and there was a lot of dust here and there. It was to the point that every time we took a step, white smoke rose up from under our feet.

It seemed like they could be hidden anywhere in this place.....

There was no shortage of hiding spots.

Yeah, I remembered.

Sumiyuri Academy.

Hanging High School.

It was here that I met Hime-chan.

".....Hey, Ii-nii."

"Yes? What is it?"

"For now, I'm thinking of just going down the hallways at random, going up stairs if we find them, and then going down if we reach the end. Is that fine with you?"

"Ah, yeah. I'm counting on you. Let me know if you sense someone there. I'll be careful, but Moeta-kun is the best at that."

"Yeah. After all, I'm a *Grim Reaper*."

"Hey, can I ask one thing?"

"What is it?"

"What do you mean by *Grim Reaper*?"

Somehow, no matter how I thought about it, it ddidn't feel right to put that existence on the same plane as *professional killers*, *assassins*, or *demonic killers*, but Izumu-kun said something like it's fitting to call the Ishinagi *grim reapers*. An outsider like me doesn't really get these precise categories.

"*Killing Names* were originally attributed randomly, Ii-nii. What we do is the same thing as everyone."

"The same thing?"

"Killing."

Moeta-kun said simply.

Houko-chan didn't say anything.

She simply gripped my right hand with her left hand.

Just that.

"If a term is different, the only reason is because we needed to differentiate and distinguish our purposes. Do you want to hear the details?"

"We have the time, so can I ask you to do that?"

"Houko, Jun-san, are you fine with that?"

".....If Onii-chan says he's fine."

"Yeah. I've been meaning to hear the details someday."

.....No, you should know.

Really, she surprisingly knows so little.....

"First, I'd like to preface this by saying that the world can be divided into four. Namely, the *Ordinary World*, or rather than ordinary, the basic world. The *Ordinary World* gives off a common and boring image, but it's basically the most powerful one. There are various opinions, but that's what I think, at least. If I were to put it in OS terms, it would be Windows."

"No, even if you compare it to an OS....."

"Right. To make it easier, let's compare it to Stands."

"Isn't that hard to understand too.....?"

"Now, for the remaining three... Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami,

Ekagami, Origami, the Four Gods and one Mirror making up the *World of Financial Power*. This is, well, like MacOS I guess."

"Are you gonna use that comparison until the end.....?"

"It's probably not a coincidence, but this place, the Sumiyuri Academy, has deep connections with the Origami family and Rule. Well, that doesn't really matter. Next, the *World of Political Power*. The Kunagisa Syndicate... right. I guess I don't need to explain this one too much in front of Ii-nii."

"Well... yeah."

Now.

What will he compare it to?

"If it were an OS, it'd be Unix."

"....."

Well, I guess that's valid.

It's about right.

"And now the last one. In this world, there is no operating system because it's the *World of Violence* dominated by inhuman abilities, abnormals, and atypicals."

"....."

So comparing them to OS was foreshadowing.

It was a hard to understand foreshadowing.

It was a foreshadowing that we would have been better without.

As if Moeta-kun was disappointed by everyone's lack of reaction, "so, after that," he said, quickly moving on to the next topic.

"We can divide the forces of this world into the seven *Killing Names* and the six *Cursing Names*, but the *Killing Names* are mainly those with killing abilities and the *Cursing Names* are mainly those with non-killing abilities. Well, that's kind of self-explanatory, but those two were originally the same thing."

"Same.....?"

"The origin is the same. It's like how reptiles split into birds and mammals. Though their origin is the same, the *Killing*

Names and *Cursing Names* are on bad terms. Even though they're almost the same."

He talked as if he was scorning and scoffing at them.

He probably *was* scorning and scoffing at them.

"Now, finally, the main subject. The seven *Killing Names*. I say seven names, because there exist seven different *Killing Names*. Starting with the first in the hierarchy, there's the *Niounomiya*, the *Massacre Magic Group*, the *Niounomiya Troupe*. Including the family branches, they boast the largest organization. The *Izumu-kun* you always mention comes from that famous place."

"…..Izumu, huh." Aikawa-san nodded with a sense of admiration. "He was strong, that guy... Speaking about just pure strength, he may have been the strongest up 'till now."

"……Probably."

"The second in the rankings is Houko's former house, the *Yamiguchi*. They're a secluded organization with a lot of mystery. Then there's the most detested ones, the group of demonic killers, the *Zerozaki*. That demonic killer you talked about, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, comes from there, though Houko and I haven't heard about him."

"……."

"……."

Aikawa-san and I were silent for a moment.

Should I try to ask?

To Aikawa-san?

You... did you kill Zerozaki Hitoshiki?

"Please, at least throw some interjections, I feel lonely. Now, having introduced those three, unfortunately the next four are quite minor. Or rather, it's just that the first three stand out too much. The Yamiguchi, despite not showing themselves, stand out too much. They should just decide on one image. Right, Houko?"

"……."

"Even my sister doesn't react. I'm not very blessed. Well,

that's fine. As for the remaining four, *Susukino, Hakamori, Tenbuki* and the one I come from, *Ishinagi*, are so minor that sometimes people mistakenly call them *Cursing Names*."

"So what's the essential point, what's the difference between those seven?"

"*Niounomiya* are professional killers. *Yamiguchi* are assassins. *Zerozaki* are demonic killers. *Susukino* are cleaners, *Hakamori* are masters of slaughter, *Tenbuki* are janitors, and *Ishinagi* are grim reapers."

"....Umm."

It's the first time I've heard about the *Susukino*, the *Hakamori*, and the *Tenbuki*. However, even if you put them together, it still doesn't change the irregularity of the *Grim Reapers*.

"So what they're doing is the same."

Moeta-kun said.

"If there's something different, it's their reason."

".....Reason."

"The *Niounomiya* **will kill if hired by anyone**. Therefore, they're professional killers. The *Yamiguchi* **only kill for the sake of one particular person**. Therefore, they're assassins. The *Zerozaki* **kill without reason**. Therefore, they're demonic killers. The *Susukino* **kill for justice**. Therefore, they're cleaners. The *Hakamori* **kill for the sake of humanity**. Therefore, they're masters of slaughter. The *Tenbuki* **kill to make things clean**. Therefore, they're janitors. The *Ishinagi* **kill people who shouldn't be alive**. Therefore, they're grim reapers. That's how it is."

".....A reason to kill people, huh."

"Of course, that's a very general explanation for beginners, and there are individual characteristics that I didn't touch upon. By the way, Ii-nii. With this explanation, the *Susukino*, *Hakamori*, *Tenbuki*, and *Ishinagi* were hard to differentiate, right? But killing for justice, humanity, cleanliness, and fate is completely different."

"*Death* is *fate*?"

"Yes. For the *Ishinagi.*"

"And for Moeta-kun?"

"I already quit being a grim reaper. Ah, not exactly. I didn't stop. I couldn't become a grim reaper from the start, right."

"....."

"You want me to explain the Cursing Names too? Or are you perhaps sick and tired of talking about this?"

"No..." I answered. "....There's also Tokinomiya Jikoku and Kino-san. There may be some hint to beat them, so let's hear it."

"Yes."

Nodded Moeta-kun.

But.

In the end, it was a topic that made my chest feel heavy.

Killer.

Demonic killer.

No matter how you say it, it's no different, huh.

Even though Houko-chan and Moeta-kun are from the *Killing Names*, they don't have any real combat experience, but even then, they're able to fight here in this place.

They're humans who can kill people.

That's, of course, including me.

I can kill people.

Even for others. Even for myself.

I can kill.

I can destroy.

Well, it's useless to think about it.

In the end, there's no answer for that kind of thing.

Even if there were, that answer won't appear.

May.

No matter how you struggle, no matter how you search, a solution that is as easy to understand and unanimously accepted as weighing a demonic killer and a murderer on the scales won't come up.

I know that.

But is it wrong?

Is it really something that wrong?

Yearning for a clear answer.

Chasing ideals.

.....It's probably something wrong.

I mean, at times, ideals are unsightly.

When you write them down, they're not always beautiful, not even as an idea.

The fox-masked man's ideals.

The *answer* he is yearning for is something primitive and final that can answer any question. That *answer* is the conclusion of the Story, something synonymous to the downfall of the world.

It's a real nuisance.

It's unnecessary.

Chasing after ideals, pursuing ideals, is certainly not a bad thing. However, even without being bad, it can become the worst.

You shouldn't forget that.

.....But, well, although things have changed a lot since then, I was reminded of the case from June after walking around for a while.

Hmmm.....

That reminds me, after we passed through this academy, I wonder what happened to the students who survived... They probably didn't all go back to normal lives and among them, there were probably a lot that considered that a normal life.

After all that, they can't go back.

They can't go back to a normal life, nor can they return to their starting point.

Well, that's.

More or less the same for everyone.

Lineage and growth.

Birth and upbringing.

Name and household.

We are all bound by it.

Even Moeta-kun and Houko-chan.

Even me.

Even Aikawa Jun.

And probably even that fox-masked man.

Twin sisters.

Missing twin sisters.

That reminds me, I never looked into the names of those sisters……

"……Hmm?"

Huh?

That reminds me, ever since I nodded, I haven't heard the sequel of Moeta-kun's explanation on *Cursing Names*. Why is that? Did he forget?

I glanced forward.

No one was there.

"--------!?"

In a panic, I turned back.

There was no one behind me either.

"Wh-wha---"

"Please calm down, Nonsense User Onii-chan."

"----Hou……"

On my right side.

Houko-chan was there.

She existed.

Still holding my hand.

"It seems, before we noticed, we ended up encountering a *trap*."

"*Trap*…….? Tra-trap, what---"

"Please calm down."

"Y-you say that, but Moeta-kun and Aikawa-san suddenly disappeared---"

"Please calm down."

"So even if you say to calm down--"

"Woof."

"....."

I calmed down.

The effect was immediate.

".....Uh, how should I say this, umm... Houko-chan, do you feel something wrong with your body?"

"Nothing. And Onii-chan?"

"No, nothing."

We didn't feel like **something was done to us**.

We didn't hear any sound and we didn't see anything.

Even then.

Why did two people...

Why did Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun **suddenly** disappear?

Wait, I've experienced something similar to this before. That's right, my first encounter with Noise-kun in the subway. In an instant, when I wasn't focused, every passenger except Noise-kun disappeared.

Suddenly.

Then, did Noise-kun... no, no matter how you think about it, he has retired. Although he's not dead, you could say he's on the verge of death. At the very least, he's not in a state where he **can do something**.

Then... no.

Ah, I see.

I heard from Izumu-kun.

"*Space Creator*..."

".....Ichirizuka Konomi?"

"Probably. So in that subway, it wasn't Noise-kun but rather Ichirizuka Konomi's doing. If I remember correctly, it's a power that creates *spaces* to split up enemies and gain a geographical advantage....."

In other words.

This is what that meant.

Even though they're an enemy, this is brilliant work.

Before we knew it, the formation we made had completely

collapsed.

There's no point in thinking about what that means. We're in this situation now, that's all. The only certain thing is that it's not a cause and effect as simple as locking something by turning a key. No, maybe the mechanism really is that simple. But we, who could only see the inside of the *mechanism*, have no way to break through.

"Moeta's story was suddenly cut off, so it shouldn't be *Tokinomiya's* thought manipulation. So as Onii-chan said, this is surely that *Space Creator*'s splitting technique."

"But... but how? How did they **carry off** Moeta-kun and Aikawa-san? There shouldn't have been a chance for that. For those two, there's no such thing as carelessness."

Those two, even though they have times when they show an irresponsible personality, and in fact they really are irresponsible, they're not foolish enough to be careless in this situation. I don't know about this *Space Creator* or whatever, but it's the same for the hypnosis techniques, *the thought manipulation techniques*, what is impossible to do physically is probably impossible and it's not like they can split people who are still conscious.

Setting Moeta-kun aside, at the very least Aikawa Jun.

There's no power that could kidnap her.

Also, maybe one, but two people?

Taking two people away without being noticed...

"No, Onii-chan," Houko-chan turned towards the way we came and pointed down the hallway. "Do you think we were the ones to be seperated?"

"Eh?"

"Please look. There are only two sets of footprints."

On the hallway that was covered with dust.

The footprints were clearly and distinctly left.

For two people.

Me and Houko-chan, two people.

"……As Onii-chan said, walking all this way and **not**

noticing that Moeta is not in front of you is impossible. That's why, I think we may have been the ones taken away."

"I....."

I **was careless**.

Receiving an explanation from Moeta-kun about *Killing Names* and becoming engrossed in it. You could say I was full of mental gaps.

There was enough room for the *Space Creator*.

"Me too, though it is embarrassing, since it's something that I know well, I removed what Moeta was saying from my mind. And regarding Aikawa-san walking behind us, I don't think she was focused from the start....."

"There was room."

"There was."

"....."

If *Space Creator* means literally what it says, it'd be easier for the person to take care of the two people in the middle rather than to divide the front and back one by one.... Maybe it was simply that he couldn't *divide* me and Houko-chan because we were holding hands.

I took Houko-chan's hand that I had let go in the confusion again.

".....Onii-chan?"

"It'd be bad to get split even more."

"Ah, I see."

"But even then... Even if it couldn't be helped for Moeta-kun since he was looking forward, didn't Aikawa-san, who was behind us, not notice anything? Is he that skillful, that *Space Creator*... To be honest, I think it's way harder to do it without Aikawa-san noticing than it is without the person in question noticing."

"....."

"What's with that meaningful silence?"

"No, it's just I think that person probably noticed."

".....What do you mean?"

"It's just a theory. If Aikawa Jun is as the rumors say, I don't think it's possible for someone to get taken right in front of her while she's conscious without her noticing."

"But..."

Then there's no way she would let it happen without doing anything.

She should have saved us.

"Is that so?"

"It is. Houko-chan seems to have some knowledge about her, but that person is insanely soft with her friends. If she knows they're in danger, there's no way she won't save them."

"……And Nonsense User Onii-chan, were you saved by her as much as you say?"

"Of course. That person is reliable."

Since I met her in April.

Even in May.

Even in June.

Even in July.

Even in September.

"……Huh?"

……Unexpectedly, I wasn't saved?

Her way of saving someone was always half assed?

She didn't save me until it was nearly too late?

……

Oh?

"It seems that person has a different way of loving things than I do," Houko-chan said. "She must have thought that it would be more efficient to break into teams of two."

"……"

Right, I forgot something important.

That person.

She exceedingly overestimates others.

She holds everyone to the same standards.

She says absurd stuff.

"What is it, Onii-chan?"

"What is it, you say....."

"Now, since not much time has passed, if we retrace our steps, we might be able to meet up with them if we're lucky."

"Ummm....."

"And Moeta isn't the kind of person to look for us either, so if we want to rejoin them, we'll have to move on our own."

"No....." After hesitating for a bit, I decided to not use this idea. "No. It may be rude to say this, but when Aikawa-san is nearby, it throws me off."

"Throws you off?"

"Too much power has a strong attraction, so it's a bit difficult for a guy like me. That's what happened the last time I came to this school, but, well, I agree that it's better to just split up rather than waste time trying to merge in poorly. It's splitting the offense and defense. Of course, one side is going to be the bait and the other is going to take advantage of that to go in deeper. To put it plainly, it's a decoy operation. We probably don't need to worry that much about Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun."

"However, on our side it's me and..."

"Right. With Houko-chan here, I can be at ease."

I pulled Houko-chan's hand.

"Then, let's go."

".....Yes. Nonsense User Onii-chan."

Houko-chan yielded to my opinion surprisingly easily. Ah, right, now that I thought about it, she was bound by the loyalty contract. I'd forgotten. So that's why. Now it made sense why, for a while, she mostly answered with "if Onii-chan is fine with it".

Hmm.....

"Hey, Houko-chan."

"What is it?"

"Is there no way to be released from the loyalty contract once it's signed?"

"Eh... what do you mean?"

"You know, earlier in the car, you said something like how you couldn't cancel the contract on your own."

"Yes... that's right. Once a loyalty contract is made, it cannot be terminated or revoked by me alone... but."

"But?"

"....."

"But?"

"Woof."

"Don't try to dodge."

"Kyaaa....."

"....."

As expected, when it's already the fourth time, she gets more inventive.

Rather, if every time while looking away with an expression filled with such an unspeakable humiliation that it almost makes her cry she imitates the barking of a dog, it makes things hard for me.

It seems Houko-chan.....

Her character keeps going in a weirder and weirder direction.

At this rate, she'll become Kasugai-san's second coming.

I must rescue her somehow.

"....From Nonsense User Onii-chan's side," eventually Houko-chan said. "You can cancel the contract anytime."

".....Ah, is that so?"

"When we made the contract, it was one-sidedly from my side, the *Yamiguchi's*, but Onii-chan has the authority to scrap it. That's how a master-servant relationship works in the first place."

"Hmm. I see." I nodded. "Then when we go home after all of this ends, I'll cancel it as soon as possible. Like a kind of cooling off period."

".....But there's also after that."

"After that?"

"If something happens after that, I won't be able to fight."

There's no guarantee it will end with that, Houko-chan said. That was certainly true.

"I know, but if that's the case, you should definitely cancel your contract with me and find someone more fitting. I know that you had to make the loyalty contract with someone close for Miiko-san's sake, but Houko-chan, that's too rash. Instead of choosing me of all people, you should have made the contract with Moeta-kun."

"Moeta is... even though our mothers are different, we are still siblings bound by blood."

"Ah, so it can't be with relatives." I see, that's how it is. "But I am bad, Houko-chan. I have a tendency to get somewhat haughty at home, so if you say things like absolute obedience, I may do things to you. Especially when it comes to a cute girl like Houko-chan. I'm not really a gentleman. Right, I thought of something good, Houko-chan, if it's with Miiko-san, it----"

"That's something that Moeta said on his own," Houko-chan cut me off. "I wasn't thinking about finding someone close. I thought about it properly and chose Onii-chan for the loyalty contract."

"....."

Thought properly.....

What was she thinking?

"There was a risk that Onii-chan would leave the hospital by the 30th, but even so, I wanted to sign a contract with you. So there's no problem."

"But---"

"It's not like this is a make-up class for Moeta's lecture, but Onii-chan, about the *Yamiguchi* I come from..."

"Yeah, they're assassins, right? A group of killers working for just one person. Well, from what I heard, they're like a bunch of loyal ninjas."

Izumu-kun said so.

Like soldiers.

Like ninjas.

However, Houko-chan continued in a cold tone.

"In my opinion, the *Yamiguchi* are just a bunch of slaves. A group of cadet slaves."

".....Slaves."

"According to them, they're a proud clan that choose the master to which they pledge their absolute loyalty to themselves, but that's just sophistry. They can only exert their power for someone else and they are completely obedient to that person. If that's not a slave, then what is? The people born as a *Yamiguchi*, every one of them is in the class of a slave. They're born to be slaves. That's the *Yamiguchi*. Even Nureginu from the *Thirteen Stairs* is no exception."

"....."

"I wanted to be the exception. I hated it. I absolutely hated it. That's why I ran away with Moeta. Although I lost my home and most of my family because of that, it was for the best. I have no regrets."

"Houko-chan....."

"I didn't want to become anyone's slave."

"That's... of course. That's the normal way of thinking. I don't know what kind of education Houko-chan went through, but that's not wrong---"

"But."

Houko-chan stopped her legs.

Since our hands were connected, I stopped too.

I looked at Houko-chan.

I looked at Houko-chan's eyes.

"If even then I have to become someone's slave, I choose Onii-chan. I don't want to obey anyone, but if it's Onii-chan, I don't mind it."

Houko-chan looked up at me.

"I trust Onii-chan enough for that. Of course, this time it's for Mii-nee-san's sake, but I move just as much for Nonsense User Onii-chan. I decided for Onii-chan's sake because I didn't

want to see Onii-chan get hurt anymore, so I made up my mind on my own. So please have more confidence. Please trust my judgment. And please trust me. I'll do the best I can."

"……I see. That was unnecessary from me."

"It really was."

Houko-chan nodded.

"Ah, but Onii-chan. If you're willing to listen to just one selfish request, I'd like to ask you to do something for me right now."

"What is it?"

"Please spare me from any direct sexual activity."

"……"

Houko-chan said clearly.

It was lacking elegance.

"Since my body is not yet ready, if possible, I'd like you to wait seven years for that."

"……Seven years, huh."

It was a difficult request, I thought.

Even after signing a loyalty contract, she has no mercy.

……I wonder if it's fine as long as it's not direct?

Just joking.

"Then Houko-chan, what should we do now?"

"Let's see… I want to avoid any more meddling from the *Space Creator*, so for now, let's keep our hands connected and rand----"

"**If you have no plans, I guess I'll have you keep me company.**"

A voice from behind.

We both turned around.

Since our hands were still connected, we got a bit tangled.

There.

When we checked our footprints earlier, there was absolutely no one there, but now there was one person. A figure wearing a white coat.

White coat...

The *Thirteen Stairs*!

"I am Emoto Sonoki, the third step of *Thirteen Stairs*. As you can see, I'm a doctor. If you want a name to call me by, you can use doctor," Emoto Sonoki said with a clear voice. "*Ii-chan*, there's someone I'd like you to meet for a bit."

0

When you want to do something, you also have to do things you don't want to, and when you don't do the things you don't want to, you can't do what you want either.

1

"Izumu-kun, you're quite strong, right?"

"Not **quite**. I'm the second strongest."

"Then could you tell me something?"

Hakata, Kyushu.

The apartment where Izumu-kun lives.

The rundown apartment where I live costs ten thousand yen per month in rent, so considering the location, the rent for this room should be about five thousand per month, but, well, since this room is furnished, I don't think that's the case.

Anyway, in one of the rooms of that apartment.

As expected, the last train had gone as I was listening to Izumu-kun talk, so I ended up having to sleep side by side with him in bed. Even though Izumu-kun technically is a man in terms of personality, his body is that of a woman, so I refused and told him I'd be fine sleeping on the floor, but he refused to budge. It was the same this time as it was last month, it seems that Izumu-kun had a very caring personality. Well, if you have such a handful of a *little sister*, it may be natural.....

So turning the lights off.

The two of us were next to each other in a narrow bed. I was still just a new acquaintance with Izumu-kun, so it was hard for me to sleep. Since I was somewhat nervous, I spoke to Izumu-kun in the dark to make the time pass.

"'Tell me something,' what is it?"

"How to become strong."

"....."

Aah, Izumu-kun groaned.

The lights were off and even outside the window, which was blocked by a thin curtain, it was quite dark in the suburbs of Fukuoka Prefecture, so it was hard to see his expression with my eyes which weren't yet accustomed to the dark.

"That's like asking a centipede how to walk."

"Does that mean asking would just make you confused? Since it's something natural for Izumu-kun."

"There's also that, but setting a centipede aside, even a guy without a hundred legs knows there's no meaning to it." Izumu-kun seemed bothered. "Don't ask me stupid questions just to satisfy your curiosity. After all, our supernatural powers can't be attained by someone with common sense like Onii-san no matter what you do."

"I'm not asking out of interest or curiosity. You know, this was also the case for the *Thirteen Stairs*, but for example, last time we got into a bit of a fist fight as a joke, right?"

"Ahh, right. I think I remember us joking around and hitting each other."

"But I couldn't do anything."

"You couldn't?"

"Of course, this isn't just to become equal to the *professional killers* and the *assassin* of the *Thirteen Stairs*, but also to fight the other guys. It's more like, you know, it's a bit weird to say it simply, but I need more of a straight way to break through."

"Aren't you meeting the *Thirteen Stairs* in three days? If Onii-san could become stronger in just three or four days, then even setting me aside, the other *professional killers* would lose face."

"That's right. But isn't there something like a secret trick?"

".....Ah. Like I said, basically it's a problem with your life itself. This is my own theory, so don't accept it as fact, but I think that in most cases a human's abilities are nurtured."

"Nurtured abilities?"

"Acquired over time."

"……I didn't expect to hear that."

For the people living in the world of darkness.

For the people living in the back world.

It's a natural talent.

Isn't it something natural?

Isn't it something destined?

At the very least.

That's what I thought they believed.

"No, if we're talking about the details, I think so too. For example, that's probably the case for the guys in the Zerozaki clan. Because they *suddenly*, without any context, become demonic killers. But even then, I think it's different from *being born with it*. Well, I'll say it in a way that's easy to understand for Onii-san. Don't think of just *professional killers* like me, it can be from the normal world, why don't you try to think of *someone great*?"

"Someone great, huh."

There's no shortage of those.

From the geniuses on that island to this former professional killer, there's been a lot of them in these last six months.

"Great people. If you pay close attention to the people around you, there's great people too. It's not so much that birds of a feather flock together, but rather, in a lot of cases, a person changes based on the people around them and in so doing, they nurture abilities. The so-called problem of the environment."

"One's only good as the people around them. Is that it?"

"I wouldn't say that. The self is important. But if you just think about yourself without considering others, you'll just become unstable. It's like the balance between Niounomiya Izumu and Niounomiya Rizumu. So in your case, without any *professional killers* or *battle maniacs* around you, there was no opportunity for you to nurture any combat abilities. You can't win against *professional killers* who grew up around these kinds

of people. That's what I think."

"....."

Certainly.

Certainly, I've only recently begun being involved with **that side**. Six years ago, this world was the only one I didn't get involved with. I didn't even know it existed in the first place.

Because I didn't know.

I didn't think of getting involved with it.

A fairy tale. A dream.

"Well, it seems like you're somewhat trained. You did something before, didn't you? A martial art in some dojo. That's why, if I were to train you constantly, you could reach an intermediate level in about three years, but doing that now is a bit...."

"Three years, huh....."

It's too long.

I can't wait that much.

"Then I guess it can't be helped. I'll just have to do it as always. It'd be fine if it were just one or two people, but for twelve, thirteen with the fox-masked man and maybe even more, it'll be difficult to escape from them with only my words....."

Shiogi-chan could have probably done it.

That girl's combat abilities were still within the bounds of normality, still on the level where they weren't outside the constraints of common sense, but her quick wits were overwhelming. I'm sure that she was the first to stand at the top of Sumiyuri Academy without possessing any special techniques.

The first and last.

Well, trying to reach that outrageous Shiogi-chan's level is absurd. She's an exception among the exceptions of exceptions and adding one more layer, an exception to that.

No, but thinking back on it, I technically did manage to escape with Shiogi-chan as my opponent. At that time, what on

earth did I do.....

Hmm.

Then, could I do it.....?

"Ah, one thing."

Izumu-kun said abruptly.

"There's one thing you could do, just one time and only under very certain conditions. You could have a means to oppose the combat focused ones in the *Thirteen Stairs*, including the *Killing Names*."

".....Is there such a method?"

"Well, rather than being a method, it's more like self-destruct technique, but it's not like there isn't one."

"Tell me."

"You decide fast. Hmmm. Well....." Izumu-kun seemed to be examining me. "Well, if it's you, you might be able to pull it off. You've got quite the nerves and guts."

"I don't think I have something that great, but if there is something, tell me."

"Ten seconds."

Izumu-kun said after punctuating with a short pause.

"Just for ten seconds, there's a way to radically raise your abilities."

"Ten seconds?"

"The first ten seconds. When that's finished, you're finished. It's that kind of unbalanced method. To explain the theory, basically we, *professional killers*, are fated to *continue to kill*, to *continue to fight*. It's not something momentary like one or two, or three or four, it's something we do for our whole lives. Either you retire like me, or you disappear from this world like Rizumu. Until you do that, the condition is that we keep on killing. Do you get it?"

"I get it."

For Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

And for Yukariki Ichihime too, that was also the case.

"That's an advantage, but, thinking about it another way,

we aren't fit for short, decisive battles. Because we're not ephemeral, we're **not suited towards the ephemeral**. Obviously, that's something which **they are more suited for**. There's no mistake that they stomp on common sense, but even then, a gap is a gap."

"……Hmm. I see."

"In other words, we're long distance runners. The premise is that we run long distances. Then, in opposition to that, you only have to go compete in short distance running, right? Onii-san and the others."

"Short distance running……."

That's why ten seconds.

A sprint of a mere ten seconds.

"Nurtured abilities. **On my side**, I've already run quite a long distance. If my opponent is above a certain level, I end up using that way of fighting, that way of killing. That's the gap you should aim for," Izumu-kun said. "Concretely, for those ten seconds, you must not breathe at all in the two second preceding them."

"Stopping… my breathing?"

"When they run 100 meters, the runners don't breathe at all, right? It's the same kind of thing. Unexpectedly, breathing consumes a lot of energy. For a short period, for just a short period, not breathing results in an increase in one's abilities. A remarkable one."

"……"

Short distance running.

I see, now that I'm hearing it, that's true. When you're running as fast as you can, you don't breathe. Not only for 100 meter runs, when you're extremely focused on something, your breathing naturally stops. When you get to the bottom of it, breathing is just *supplying oxygen*. There's enough stored in your body for ten seconds.

"As for you, I'm sure you've done that much unconsciously in the past without even realizing it, but you should try doing it

more consciously. You have to be more thorough and more aware of it than ever before. There's a big difference between being aware and not. Your body will probably become so light you won't believe it and you'll gain some strength."

"But isn't that the same for them....."

"Basically, we **don't do that**. Well, I'm not including those crazy guys from the *Zerozaki*, but that's why I said we also have a *next*. Right, it's ingrained in us. That's why we choose to use the most efficient breathing method, what are called *short breaths* in swimming. The guys who don't hold their breath are faster than the guys who do for a limited amount of time, right? Even for world class long-distance runners, in a 100 meter race, even if they don't win, they can put up a good performance."

However, Izumu-kun added.

"Naturally, after the 100 meters, they're in a state of incredible hyperventilation. It's not a state where they can fight. Not going into that state, not falling into that state, is our method."

"So that's why it's just once."

"Right. Also, this method isn't absolute. Originally, it was a question about how much you could close the gap. It's still better to run away with your life than to try this method. In front of overwhelming power, even if you put your life on the line, you're still a small fry. I, for example, can act for ten minutes without breathing."

"....."

A monster.

With that small body, how.....

"But that's just something I learned from meeting a *breathless* guy once. I didn't have any acquired defensive abilities from the beginning, since there aren't many guys who think like that. That's why, well, using it or not depends on your nerves and guts.

"I see. Well, thanks for letting me know. That was helpful."

"You're welcome."

"Izumu-kun is unexpectedly a good guy."
"It takes time to understand my qualities."
"It seems that way."
Saying that, I sighed.

"Now... what should I do....."

I wondered what I should do.
That was three days ago, on the night of the 27th.
And now it was the 30th of September.
Inside one of the buildings of Sumiyuri Academy.
I thought the same thing.
Holding Houko-chan's hand.
In front of us was one person, one of the *Thirteen Stairs*.
The third step of the *Thirteen Stairs*.
Emoto Sonoki.
Doctor.
"Didn't you hear me, *Ii-chan*? Then, want me to say it once more? Come with me. There's someone I want you to meet. The person in question wishes for it."
Emoto Sonoki was a woman.
An intellectual, well-featured face with a dignified voice. Stylish glasses. A high stature for a woman and a slender body. Probably in the middle of her twenties, about Aikawa-san's age. A very doctor-like white coat. From the atmosphere emanating from her, I could tell at a glance that she was a medical professional. I thought that while remembering my former professor from my time at the ER3 Program, Miyoshi Kokoromi.
.....Just.
Her, Emoto-san's fashion, or rather, her style, was greatly wrong in one part.
Under her white coat was a swimsuit.

A very cute one piece.

With a frilly pareo coiled around her waist.

"……!"

"……Onii-chan. I hope you're not thrilled by the surprising contrast between a white coat and a swimsuit."

"I-idiot, on what grounds? How rude."

I responded to Houko-chan's merciless whisper with a similarly low voice. In the first place, it's not something to get thrilled about. In this unusual situation, in a sense, her style was frightening. Some time ago, I was greatly surprised by the Niounomiya siblings' straitjacket style, but this far surpassed it. Well, it's not like I wasn't just slightly thrilled, but a feeling of caution came first.

Houko-chan seemed to feel the same as she put more strength in her left hand holding my right one.

Emoto Sonoki. Doctor.

I've been thinking she was a man from her name, probably because of that assumption I was careless enough not to check with Izumu-kun.

Anyway.

I need to see how the other side moves here.

I need to continue remaining silent.

Since she's a doctor, she probably doesn't have that much combat ability and if I remember correctly, Emoto-san isn't that fascinated by the fox-masked man.

Depending on how things unfold, we could even ask her to guide us, but I was a bit intrigued by her saying that there was someone she'd like me to meet. If she was talking about the fox-masked man, she would've just said it straight, so it must be someone else.

"Uuuuh."

While I was lost in my thoughts.

Emoto-san uttered the following line.

No, it wasn't a line.

It was sobbing.

"Uuuaaaaaaaah."

With tears flowing down her cheeks, she crouched down on the spot. Without even trying to hide them, they flowed down her face.

"Wh-why, why, why... I sai-said it right th-I said it th-that you come. I-I was able to ask... even then, why, why won't you, won't you, won't you, come with me... that's, maybe I didn't say it well, and I might have fumbled with my words, but even then, wh-why didn't you say, you say anything, why are you silent, why, why are you ignoring me? Say, say something....."

"..... !?"

Her once graceful face was now a mess.

She continued to cry out in despair.

Without caring that Houko-chan and I were speechless.

"Wh-why doesn't anyone listen, listen to what I'm saying, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. Wha-what is it, you could've followed me at, at least respond. U uuuuaaaaaaaaaa."

"....."

"....."

"Uuuuaaaaaaaaaa. You too, you too must hate me I'm sure you do, you, you think that I'm a crazy woman who dresses bizarrely. Wh-what about it? Don't look at me like that, I'm just dressing up like this because I like it so isn't it fine? I'm not causing any trouble, or is it that just being reflected in your eyes is a trouble, then are you telling me to d-die? Wh-why, you must also want me to d-die right? You're thinking it, you don't need to say it, I can get that, don-don't treat me like an idiot, at least that much, I-I can get..... ho-how can you so simply, say someone should die? I-I can't believe it. It's fine I'll die, but in exchange I'll curse you, I'll curse you, I'll plant maggots eggs in your capillary. Uuuwaaaaaaa."

It was quite a sight to see a woman in her twenties, and a quite beautiful one, crying unabashedly. I've encountered a lot of people in my life, but... this is quite a new character for me.

Emotional instability, it's not something like that.

"Eerrr..."

"N-no! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't get mad! Don-don't hit me, don't strike me, I-I don't like it when it hurts! I wo-won't cry anymore, I won't cry. Sorry, sorry, sorry, a-all of what I just said was a lie! P-please forgive me! Hiiiii, n-no, no, no, scary, scary. I'll do anything, p-please don't get angry. Aaauuu, f-father, mother, noo, someone... someone, someone, someone, save me, save me... Uueeee."

"....."

"Wh-why, are you silent? Why are you silent there? N-no, please say something, it, it was my bad, so, so please, don-don't hate me so much, don't hate me, don't hate me that much, I-I will, do it properly, properly, I'll do it properly, n-noo, d-don't, don't hate me so much, I-I'll stop crying now, I'll do it properly, I-I'll, I'll do it properly, I'll do it properly, I'll do it properly, I'll do it properly, I-I'll smile, I'll smile so, please, please, please, please, please, please. Y-you see, e-even I can smile properly. Wh-when I smile I'm pretty cute, I... hehehe, aahaha... ehehe."

It was an insane smile.

.....

Izumu-kun.

I... really wish you would've told me this.

Well... it was probably hard to say.

And he said he'd been in her care.

"Um... I won't inflict any harm to you, so umm, first stand..."

"I-i-iii-it's a lie, a lie, you're trying to fool me by saying that, it's, a-always the case, I-I know it, I know, don-don't belittle me, saying nice stuff with you mouth and, and what everyone does is the same. Wh-what is it this time, wh-what do you want to steal from me, I-I don't have anything now, I don't have anything now, i-it's the truth, be-believe me."

"....."

"N-no! I-it's not that,uumm, I-I wasn't doubting you, I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I-I'm a despicable woman, even, even though you are being kind, I-I am distrusting you, bu-but, but, d-don't make a face like that, e-even if you make that kind of face it's fine, p-please don't hate me, I, normally I'm not like this, n-now I'm just a bit confused, it's wrong, this isn't the real me, I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry... it's not like, this it's not, like this it's not like this....."

She held her head and lied down.

While lying down, she continued crying.

It looked like she wouldn't move even a bit.

I don't have any experience in dealing with something like this.

"....."

And.

Houko-chan silently let go of my hand and walked briskly to her. While I was wondering what she intended to do, she lifted her up with her small arm and with the other hand, she slapped Emoto-san's cheeks.

Paww, the sound reverberated.

"Don't cry in front of Onii-chan anymore."

"....."

"Since he's someone who easily feels empathy."

She said.

At the same pace as she had gone, Houko-chan came back and took my hand again.

Without making any particular face.

Emoto-san was...

She was stunned and stared at Houko-chan for a while, but eventually, she finally stood up. The hem of her white coat was covered in dust and her bare feet were in the same situation, but she didn't seem to mind that much.

"I'm sorry."

This time she apologizes with a small voice.

Her voice and body were still trembling, but...

For now, it seems she's calmed down.

"……Um, would you mind… following me?"

"Understood," I responded instantly without leaving a pause. "If we're going somewhere, please guide us."

"Yes. This way."

Half running, Emoto-san overtook us and showed us her back. From behind she looked like just someone wearing a white coat.

"Thanks… Houko-chan. I couldn't have done anything by myself."

"Not at all……"

We talked to each other in a whisper, being careful not to be overheard by Emoto-san.

"But I wonder where she intends to lead us."

"Who knows… Well, we didn't have any plans and we didn't have any landmarks, so I don't think anything bad will happen……."

"*Ii-chan*."

Emoto-san said without turning back.

"Y-yes……."

"Your stomach… You're hurt, right?"

"Ah, well……."

The wound Houko-chan gave me.

There was only some pain and I don't think it was particularly a hindrance, but as expected of a *doctor*, she was able to notice with this little contact.

"If you're in pain, just let me know… I have some painkillers, at least."

"……."

"I-I have as many as you want."

As many as I want?

Doctor, huh……..

"I-if it's unnecessary, then……"

"Ah, no, no, no. I'll take as many as possible."

I inadvertently didn't even think about it.

I wonder how the fox-masked man manages her as a subordinate... Even for that man, her character seems like a bit too much to handle.....

"E-even for anything else, if there's something, say it anytime. I'll help you. I-it could even be talking to me about your problems. I said I'm a doctor, but I'm also a psychiatrist."

"....."

I wish you'd cure yourself first.

Is this when you use the expression of failing to practice what you preach?

"Hey... Emoto-san."

"Y-yes. What is it?"

"The person you want me to meet, who is it?"

".....So-sorry, I was told to keep it a secret. B-but---"

"No, it's fine if it's a secret."

"Y-you don't have to sound... so disappointed. That's, certainly I may have been too cold, but....."

"....."

Even though I thought I phrased it so it wouldn't sound like that.....

This is tough.

It'd be easier if she was at least younger than me.....

"Then could you just tell me where we're heading? This building is pretty complex and seems easy to get lost in, doesn't it?"

"W-we are heading towards the art room. W-we have been using this place as a hideout for some time, so I don't get lost."

"Is that so... I was wondering where the fox-masked man was."

.....So I could've come here directly after talking to Noise-kun. In any case, since I was stabbed by Houko-chan right afterwards, I couldn't have come here until today.....

"U-umm..."

This time Emoto-san was the one to start speaking.

"*Ii-chan*... Y-you seem like a good person, so there's

something I want to tell you....."

"....Yes."

Hmm.....

Judging people as *good* this easily might be the source of this person's personality.

"I-I've been in the *Thirteen Stairs* for a long time. Ah, that's not a lie. It's the truth."

"It seems so."

"Because, you know, uh, people get hurt all the time around Mr. Fox."

"....."

"I-I like healing other people's injuries." Emoto-san said. "I-it makes me feel useful."

"That's why you're close to Mr. Fox."

"Y-yes. There have been a lot of injured people around him for a long time now. Since before he met me. There have been a lot of injured people, and a lot of deaths too, but if I'm here, I can reduce the number of losses even if just by a bit."

"....."

"E-even the people Izumu-kun killed, I've been reviving them in secret."

So you were doing that kind of thing.....?

I'm sure Izumu-kun would be surprised.

"That's why you should be at ease."

"At ease... what do you mean?"

"N-no matter what happens to you here on these school grounds, I'll save you." Emoto-san briefly turned back. "*Ii-chan* too and that girl too."

".....That's... I'm grateful,but... you are technically my *enemy*, aren't you?"

"The *Thirteen Stairs* are... just a group that Mr. Fox randomly gathered... I'm not really... I'm fine as long as I can heal people."

"....."

"I don't care who I'm healing. I just want to heal injuries,

that's all."

"……Is that so."

Certainly, this way of thinking.

As he said, it was similar to Izumu-kun's.

Izumu-kun who just wanted to kill,

And Emoto-san who just wants to heal.

There was something in common.

"Umm… Emoto-san."

"Wh… what is it?"

Her voice seemed afraid.

"A-ask anything… anything, I'll do anything, so please don't hit me."

"……. *The world's end*--- what Mr. Fox calls *the Story's end*, what do you think about it?"

When I asked this question to Kino-san…

He said he didn't care.

That he only cares about Mr. Fox.

"Wh-what I think… I think that…"

Emoto-san answered.

"From the beginning, I've thought that people should just die, so I'm fine with it… I just want the world to end quickly."

"…….Don't you… enjoy healing wounds?"

"I heal injuries because… I can't stand seeing them."

Can't stand seeing them.

Because she can't stand looking at injuries.

Because she can't stand looking at other's wounds.

"I-I hate it. I like healing people's wounds, I feel alive by doing so, I feel like I'm useful, but even then, I hate wounds. I hate wounds. Blood too. I hate it. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it."

"……."

"If they die, they won't get hurt... if they die, if they die, no one would ever have to get hurt again... if you're live, you should just die, but for some reason no one tries to die... it's strange, it's strange, it's strange....."

Suddenly, my left hand was strongly tugged.

It was Houko-chan.

Houko-chan warned me with a small voice.

"Please don't try to talk to that person."

"Eh... but..."

"She's probably not the kind of person you can get through with words... what she's been saying since has been incoherent since earlier. It's not like what Dissonance-san said, but... I don't think Onii-chan's nonsense gets through to that person. Even if it does, as long as it's not clever, it only does so in a bad way."

"A bad way....."

That's bad.

There's nothing worse than the negative effects of nonsense.

"Ah... right, I remembered."

Emoto-san stopped and turned around. Naturally, Houko-chan took a somewhat defensive posture, but she didn't mind us and searched through the pockets of her white coat.

And.

"Here."

She threw something in my direction.

I instinctively tried to catch it, but Houko-chan, who was in front of me, caught it before I could. Houko-chan confirmed what was in her hands and then passed it to me.

It was packaged tablets.

.....?

Is this the painkillers?

"They work well against Kino-san's *poison*... this medicine."

".....Huh?"

"If she drinks that.... she'll get better immediately."

Is she talking about Miiko-san?

Is she saying this medicine works for Miiko-san's disease?

This is the antidote?

"That's a lie."

Houko-chan said.

"There's no reason for you to give this to us now."

"It... it's not a lie....."

"Crying won't fool me."

"I-It's not a lie, It's not a lie, It's not a lie, It's not a lie... wh-why does nobody believe me... e-even kids make fun of me... I-I have never even told a lie, not once have I fooled someone, even though I don't mean it like this, I-I---"

"I believe you."

I said to Emoto-san.

"Onii-chan..." Houko-chan pulled my hand strongly. "Again, this easily--"

"It's fine, Houko-chan."

After calming Houko-chan, I repeated, "I believe you, Emoto-san." Emoto-san said "I-it's a lie....." and trembled.

"Y-you're probably just pretending to believe me... I-I knew it. Wh-what is it, what do you intend to use me for this time... Th-that's, I will absolutely not listen to violence... l-lies, all lies....."

"I'm not lying, I just want to hear the reason. What's the point of giving me the antidote now, Emoto-san?"

"........Because diseases are a sort of wound."

I want to heal.

She said.

"I can't stand looking..."

"But that's..."

That's your reason.

And shouldn't be the fox-masked man's reason.

The man who wants to see the end.... for the man who wants to see the end of everything, other people's wounds don't even enter his eyes.

Even then, why...

"Is it your own decision?"

"No."

She shook her head like a child.

Then she turned on her heels and resumed walking.

"Mr. Fox said that I should give you that medicine as soon as I meet you."

"Is... that so?"

What is he thinking?

Didn't he target Miiko-san to raise my motivation? What's he trying to do by lowering my tension after I've come all this way?

"He... doesn't need it anymore."

Emoto-san said.

"Now, um... he said he doesn't care about that woman Asano-san. That either way, it's the same."

"....."

"That since the Story has accelerated this much, even if you obtain the antidote, you won't go home."

After saying that, she went silent and advanced even further inside the building.

.....

Though I said that to her, it was only so that she wouldn't break into tears. In reality, I don't know if this tablet is the antidote. To confirm it, I must either directly faceKino-san... or the fox-masked man.

That's why I walked behind Emoto-san.

Just for that.

For the antidote.

Just for Miiko-san.

I have no other purpose. If I confirm that this antidote is real, I'll leave this school right then and there. Besides that, there's not a single reason for me to stay here.

What the fox-masked man says...

Is completely off the mark.

I may be your enemy, but even then, that doesn't mean I'm going to do what you want me to do.

Not at all.

"……Mr. Fox, where is he?"

"I don't know……"

Where did her dignified voice from when she appeared go, anyway? Emoto-san answered in an unclear and childish way. From her voice, it seemed like she was tearing up again from my question.

"I-it's not a lie, I really don't know….. wh-why does no one believe me… sniff, I-I'm just an underling, trash, garbage, a woman who can't do anything by herself, so there's no way I can know that… a-are you asking that on purpose? I-it's hard to know where Mr. Fox is… I think he's probably somewhere inside the academy……."

"What about the two I was with……?"

"I don't know……."

"……."

"I-it's the truth, I really don't know. Y-you should ask that to Konomi-chan… since Konomi-chan was the one to do it. Even finding you earlier was just a coincidence……."

"……A coincidence, is it?"

Then this too is what the fox-masked man would call fate?

"Then… can you tell us about the other *Thirteen Stairs*? Setting aside the antidote, if possible, I'd like to meet Kino-san once more……."

"……Y-you know."

"What is it?"

"P-please listen without getting angry, okay? I-it's not like I'm the one at fault… Ah, b-but does that sound like an excuse? I-it's not like that, it's the truth, it's not my fault… Ah, don't get me wrong! I'm not trying to blame someone else, th-then it might be my fault… I'm sorry."

"Um… Emoto-san, how old are you?"

"Hih!"

.....Why are you bending your body that much?

She nervously turned back and confirmed the distance between us. Then she collected herself and started walking as if nothing happened.

"Twenty seven years old."

".....Is that so."

I thought that maybe she just looked older, but she was as she appeared.

Speaking of twenty seven... that was about the same age as Hikari-san.

That's hard to imagine.....

In terms of personality, Houko-chan was much more mature.

Hmmm.....

It wasn't like Houko-chan said, but this was bad. I was gradually beginning to feel empathy for her. I needed to be careful, or the other *Thirteen Stairs*... Tokinomiya Jikoku, the Thought Manipulator or Ichirizuka Konomi, the Space Creator would take advantage of me.

So.

"Emoto-san. So what about the other *Thirteen Stairs*? Does that mean you're not cooperating with them?"

"It's not that... uh, well it's that, it's not, but... you know, *Ii-chan*. I-it's about Kino-kun."

"Yes."

"Kino-kun, isn't here today."

"Not here?"

"It's not just Kino-kun... not everyone from *Thirteen Stairs* is here. It's too dangerous."

"It's dangerous....."

What's that?

Even though I came all prepared.

"**It looked like Mr. Fox planned to do something dangerous**. Kino-kun and Furuyari-san... and also Kajou-san and Utage-san are not here."

"Then, putting it the other way around..."

Right now, excluding Noise-kun, the ones present at this Sumiyuri Academy are Emoto Sonoki, Ichirizuka Konomi, Miotsukushi Takami and Miotsukushi Misora, Yamiguchi Nureginu, Tokinomiya Jikoku, and Migishita Rurero?

"At first, it was planned that everyone should welcome Mr. Fox's *enemy*, *Ii-chan*, but....."

"Yes. That's what I heard too."

If we believe Aikawa-san's words, Kajou Akira is no longer alive, but even if we exclude him, I didn't expect three people to be absent and furthermore, I didn't expect Kino-san to be among them.

What does it mean.....?

And the fact that they easily gave the antidote away.

The fox-masked man... Saitou Takashi.

Perhaps.....

Even now, he doesn't feel like settling things?

Even after coming all this way, still.

Still...

Does it mean it's not yet the time to name himself?

"In other words, the *enemies* in the academy are," Houko-chan said. "Including you, Emoto-san, nine people?"

"Yes... ah, you people already defeated the boy at front of the gate, right?" She said as if she just remembered. "I already tended to his injuries, so you don't need to worry."

"I'm not worried....."

Well, since we left him there, I was somewhat concerned.

"It felt good to treat his wounds. There's something different about treating someone who's been hit by a car. It felt like a climax... ufun."

"....."

"Ah, we've arrived. Here."

Emoto-san stopped walking and pointed at the plate attached to the door on her right side.

On it was written "Art Room."

.....However, the art room of this academy.

The art room of Sumiyuri Academy.

What in the world were they teaching.....

It’s impossible to know now, but I can’t say I wasn’t slightly intrigued.

"I'm back... I brought him."

Emoto-san, casually, without even confirming our reactions, opened the door of the art room and entered. I was a bit hesitant, but Houko-chan stepped in and followed her inside.

Inside were three people.

Miotsukushi Takami, Miotsukushi Misora.

And...

Niounomiya Izumu.

The Miotsukushi sisters.

I could tell that these two were Miotsukushi Takami and Miotsukushi Misora immediately. Since I didn't know any of their characteristics, I wouldn't be able to distinguish them individually, but if two people were standing side by side and had the same face, there was no other answer.

Identical clothing.

Identical appearance.

Differentiating between them was practically impossible.

Which one is Miotsukushi Takami?

Which one is Miotsukushi Misora?

But maybe there is no need to differentiate them?

Because these girls are a pair as one.

What do you call it again, the clothes these two were wearing... was it called a priest's garb? Though there were some modifications to the design, I saw this type of clothing before when I went sightseeing around shrines and temples with Miiko-san. Judging from the size, it was the samghāti, one of the garments monks wear.

It was certainly a strange outfit to see in an abandoned school, but... well, it couldn't beat the impact of a white coat and a swimsuit, so I was able accept it with relative ease.

The problem was that the two of them were lying on the floor of the art room, on their back, with their eyes turned up white. The two of them were both unconscious and folded in on top of each other.

And, more importantly, the problem...

Was the young girl on the opposite side of the piled up Miotsukushi sisters.

No, *young boy*.

Niounomiya Izumu.

"Yo."

The first one to talk was Izumu-kun.

He was looking at me.

"Long time."

"It hasn't really been a long time....."

"Right... Oh, Doctor, thank you. You really brought them here."

"Y-yes." *Doctor* Emoto Sonoki answered. She looked somewhat embarrassed. Looking down, she hid her eyes with her bangs. "Uh, I didn't think I would find them this quickly, it was a completely fortuitous encounter... or rather, there were footprints, so I followed them....."

"Then, you haven't met Konomi yet?"

"Yes. Should I have brought Konomi-chan too?"

"Spare me. You know I hate her."

"R-ri-right, sorry."

"It's not something to apologize over... Ah, right, right, I forgot." Izumu-kun pointed a leg towards the two lying on the floor. "After I asked Doctor to find Onii-san, those two attacked me so I fought them off to kill time."

"Ah, is that so....." Emoto-san said. "I was wondering why Takami-chan and Misora-chan were sleeping here... May I examine them?"

"Do as you want. I didn't kill or injure them. I need to save **today's massacre** for later."

Gyahaha, Izumu-kun laughed.

"Izumu-kun....."

"Mm?"

"The 18th member of the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe; a byproduct of the thirteenth experiment; one as a pair, a pair as one; the personality opposite to Rizumu the *Carnival*, Izumu-kun the *Man Eater*... who, since last month's case, was publicly thought of as dead but was, in fact, living in retirement. Why are you in a place like this?"

".....What's with that explanatory line reeking of exposition?"

"No, it’s nothing."

Actually, it was an explanation for Houko-chan.

Though she might identify him from his appearance, it was just in case.

"So... seriously, why are you here?"

"Huuh? I came to save Onii-san, of course. I thought you’d feel helpless alone... huh, what?"

Izumu-kun caught sight of Houko-chan. On top of her short, since she was in my shadow, it seems he didn't notice her until now.

"Is that Onii-san's child?"

"Do I look that old?"

"You look like the sort of person, I guess."

"....."

You say a lot.

Setting that aside... this is bad.

If I remember correctly, Izumu-kun hates the *Yamiguchi*... even if she no longer has any ties with the main house, should I introduce Houko-chan, whose origin is that of a *Yamiguchi*.....?

"Ah. Perhaps she’s the person who helped you? She may look like a child, but the atmosphere she exhibits isn't that of a normal person. Ah, what’s this, what’s this, that's cruel, Onii-san. You're so cold, so distant. Even though I came all the way to help you like a hero."

"No matter how caring you are, I didn't think you were that caring, Izumu-kun."

".....Well, yeah."

Izumu-kun smiled mischievously.

"But it's true that I came to help you. At the very least, I consider myself to be Mr. Fox's enemy now." He pointed at the Miotsukushi sisters lying on the floor again. "Don't you think the fact that these two are lying on the floor knocked out is proof enough?"

".....Emoto-san."

I called out to Emoto-san, the *Doctor*, who was, once again, lying on the floor, not caring about getting dirty and examining the Miotsukushi sisters. Emoto-san cried "Y-yes!" with the voice of an elementary schooler being called by a violent teacher.

"W-wh-what is it..... I-I'm just doing an examination... I-I am not doing anything bad. B-but, right, I must have done or said something that displeased you, it must have been a bother to have me moving in front of you, it was inconsiderate, s-sorry."

"....."

This is bad.

It's becoming a bit funny.

"Emoto-san, how are those two?"

"How are they, you say....."

"**Are they really unconscious?**"

"Y-yes... But I don't understand why you are asking that... ah, sorry, I didn't mean to probe further, b-but, there's no need to stare at me like that, no, no matter how much you hate me, i-it's cruel, why are you doing this much, it's cruel, it's cruel, why only me... why do only I get in so much trouble, always, even though I was always doing my best, even though I was seriously living, even though I just wanted to become a doctor."

".....And the reason for them being unconscious?"

"A-a concussion....."

"Thank you very much."

I turn back towards Izumu-kun."

Izumu-kun was grinning.

"Are you fine with just that? Maybe Doctor is an accomplice, you know? After all, we once ate from the same plate and were pretty close."

"I don't doubt you that much. It's just... well, just in case. You're from the same house as the Miotsukushi sisters, so I thought I should at least doubt that."

"Hah... just because we're from the same house, it goes like

this. The guys from the branch families really hate the people from the main family. I swear, I've already retired, but it made me realize it again, how awful it is of Mr. Fox to really try to replace the seat I stood on with these small fries... Even Onii-san might have a chance against them."

"But..."

I looked back at Emoto-san for a moment, who was concentrating on caring for them, and then I said to Izumu-kun.

"...You didn't kill them."

"That's because the time of massacre is only one hour per day."

"I don't think that's the only reason, though."

"I'm tired. I didn't want to do any pointless exercise," Izumu-kun said, seemingly annoyed. "I said it many times to them, that I didn't want to fight weaklings, that they were five billion nine hundred and ninety-nine million nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine people too few, so I advised them to come back later, but they didn't listen."

"That recommendation is so extreme I can only think of it as provocation... But you said you're tired? Tired of what?"

"I just arrived at this academy. I didn't think it would be such a hard place to find, so I ended up doing a complete sweep of this area. I heard a sound like there was a car crash, which was probably Onii-chan, right? I arrived a bit before that, but I got lost in the building. When I encountered Doctor by chance, I decided to let her search for Onii-san and rested. At that time, I was completely exhausted. Since I sweat quite a lot, you could even say I was drenched. I thought you'd leave before me."

"Izumu-kun's gags are really unique, huh."

I wonder who could keep up with his sense of humor.

"Well, I know it was a long march from Fukuoka, but didn't you have a bit more time to spare?"

"I didn't have any leeway. When Onii-san left my home in a

hurry, I immediately chased after you."

"....."

Um.....

Fukuoka to Kyoto.

Three days by running... that's what he said, right?

Since that was two days ago.....

.....

Did he run!?

"That's absurd... even if you took the shortest way, it's well over five hundred kilometers....."

"I had a close call at the Kanmon Straits."

"Did you swim!?"

"Gyahaha, you're an idiot, Onii-san. I wouldn't use my energy that pointlessly. There's a train tunnel passing through the Kanmon Straits, isn't there? Use your head a bit."

"No, use a train!"

Did he fight with the Miotsukushi sisters after that situation?

And he destroyed them.

Once again, he's beyond limits... this professional killer.

"Rather," Houko-chan inserted a basic retort. "You didn't have to put yourself in danger by using the train line as there is a proper tunnel for human use passing through the Kanmon Straits."

"....."

Ah.

Izumu-kun looked away.

It seems he didn't know.

He was blushing.....

C-cute.....?

"Ah, um... but, Izumu-kun," Emoto-san was the one who began talking. "Then why not come back to the *Thirteen Stairs*? I, u-until now, I was told by Mr. Fox that Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan were dead... so, I can't put it well in words, but since you're alive--"

"Rizumu is dead. Inside me."

Izumu-kun said flatly.

It was like he said it to himself.

"If Rizumu isn't here, there's no point to being under Mr. Fox."

"T-that's... s-so Izumu-kun hates me too, I-I see... so that's how it was. I thought Izumu-kun was an exception, but s-sorry, it must have been a nuisance to believe that by myself, I-I'm such an idiot, ho-how many times must I make the same mistake to be satisfied..... uuuaaa."

".....Stop crying. I didn't say that. Ah, really, what a troublesome personality. Onii-san thinks so too, right?"

"No... I kinda like it....."

What is this.....

This emotion stemming from the depths of my chest.

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"Perhaps, this is love....."

My toes were stepped on.

Precisely, the top of the little toe.

It was Houko-chan.

".....Onii-chan."

"....."Yes."

Uwaah.

She had a really scary blank expression on her face.

"Um... how should I say it, please fix your habit of getting too close to everyone... you have too little sense of urgency."

"I-I absolutely don't have such a habit."

"As if you'd know."

Houko-chan was grinding my shoes with her foot.

It was pretty painful.

In response to our exchange, Izumu-kun went "Um?" and tilted his head.

"....."This girl, is she your little sister? Didn't you say your little sister was dead?"

"Ah, no, this girl is my neighbor and---"

"I'm Yamiguchi Houko."

That easily...

Houko-chan named herself.

"Pleased to meet you, Niounomiya Izumu-san."

".....Yamiguchi, huh."

The smile disappeared from Izumu-kun's expression.

No, calm down... if it's just her surname, he shouldn't be able to judge her yet. Even I didn't realize it until just a day ago, so there's no way Izumu-kun could easily tell from his first meeting. In his heart, he must be half sure and half doubting---

"I see. I thought you weren't normal. So you're an *assassin*."

"....."

He easily saw through it.

.....Well, I guess that's normal.

"What does this mean? Onii-san."

Izumu-kun's question was directed at me.

It couldn't be helped since he already found out, so I fulfilled my role of explaining the situation. Especially that Houko-chan had already completely cut ties with the *Yamiguchi* house and that now she had no relation to the name *Yamiguchi*. I emphasized this point and repeated it two or three times.

"Hmm..." Izumu-kun looked curiously at Houko-chan.

Houko-chan was just looking at Izumu-kun.

".....Well, it's fine."

Eventually, Izumu-kun said.

"If she's Onii-san's ally, she's not my enemy."

"Izumu-kun....."

"However, Houko-chan," Izumu-kun said towards Houko-chan. "Onii-san's enemy from the Yamiguchi, Yamiguchi Nureginu. I'll do my best to erase him."

"Please," Houko-chan answered coolly. "He has no relation to me."

".....Even though you're both *little sisters*, you're quite a different type from my sister."

Izumu-kun said to the sky as if he was fed up with Houko-chan's reaction. I thought about saying that the *big brothers* were quite different too, but I didn't want the story to become any more complicated, so I held off.

Sigh……

We were lucky that Izumu-kun was a siscon.

I thought.

"……Anyway, with this, the remaining *Thirteen Stairs* in this academy… are five including Emoto-san… huh."

The original number was reduced by quite a lot despite us having done nothing.

Was it due to natural virtue?

"It's the devil's luck."

Houko-chan said that without restraint.

However, I thought she was right.

I thought a few of them must have been taking Aikawa-san on, so the ones I had to confront were, at most, one or two people. And if Houko-chan and Izumu-kun were to participate…..

At this rate, it seemed we would get somewhere. There was still the fox-masked man left, but… we already obtained the antidote (seemingly), so the only remaining problem was how to escape. To be honest, Aikawa-san's convertible had caught fire from the impact of the head-on breakthrough. It was an awful end for the second car that she probably just bought, but in short, we currently had no means of going back…….

But… is this it?

The fox-masked man made me his enemy.

Was it something of this level that he was aiming for?

If it was just this much, I'd experienced it six years ago.

Six years ago, it wasn't this tame.

And yet…

Was this what the fox-masked man wished for?

Was this the Story Saitou Takashi wished for?

If this is the end of the world.

If this is the end of the story.

I’ve seen such things to death.

"What happened? Onii-chan."

"No, nothing." I extended my hand calmly in response to Houko-chan's question. "So... what are you going to do, Izumu-kun? I mean, what do you want to do? I'm thinking of searching for Mr. Fox."

"Me too."

"Want to go together?"

"Is it fine? To trust me."

"It's fine. I'm used to being betrayed," I answered. "It’s easy to trust people if you intend to get betrayed from the start."

"That's nonsense."

"It is nonsense."

I said.

"I love you, Izumu-kun."

"……..That's the worst pick-up line."

"Gyahahaha." Izumu-kun laughed and left the art room, passing by our side while avoiding the Miotsukushi sisters and Emoto-san.

"Doctor. Can I leave those two to you?"

"Eh... ah, yes. Leave it to me. I will do my best."

"Good luck."

Saying that, Izumu-kun went ahead alone. There was the *Space Creator*, but going ahead in a place without electricity was also problematic, so I tried to go after him. However, Houko-chan blocked me from doing so.

"Mm."

"……?"

"Mm. Mm."

"What is it?"

"……Mm. Mm. Mm."

"What's going on? Why're you pointing at your own face?"

"……Mm!"

She tried to step on my foot with incredible force.

I barely avoided it.

I-I thought I was going to get crushed……..

"What is it... you've been scary since earlier."

"…..Nonsense User Onii-chan, are you the type to not give food to the fish you caught?"

"Um? No, I don't really fish. I wonder when was the last time I fished……"

"…….You don't need to remember." Houko-chan pulled my hand and began to leave the art room. "Let's go."

"Ah, wait for me."

I didn't really get it.

It was weird.

…….I mean, in this school, Sumiyuri Academy, even after having closed down, there were still only weird people here. If I'm the only one being serious, I just end up feeling like an idiot.

We left the art room and closed the door.

"……"

"Onii-chan?"

"Wait a bit."

Just in case, I stuck to the door and investigated the inside. And, "Uuuee, everyone left, everyone left, I-I'm sure they left because they hate me, wh-why can't I read the mood, even though I know that I'm hated by everyone, I-I should have been the one to leave, what an idiot, thinking that I was becoming friendly, e-everyone was kind so I was just allowed to be with them, ahahaha, i-it's no good, I can't cry, I-Izumu-kun said I shouldn't cry, I-I need to smile, ahahahah, hihihi, but, but leaving me out, it's awful, I'm sure they're currently saying bad things about me, they're laughing about my clothes being

weird, wh-why am I always like this....." I heard that voice.

"....."

Let's meet again.

One day, let's have a talk between us.

I quickly vowed in my heart to see her again, and moved away from the door, following Izumu-kun's footsteps while still holding hands with Houko-chan.

I was able to quickly catch up with Izumu-kun.

Maybe Ichirizuka Konomi isn't around here anymore.

"By the way, Onii-san."

"What is it?"

"Aikawa Jun, is she here?"

"Yeah. She is."

"Is that so. As I thought."

"As you thought?"

"I only spoke to her a bit, but I think I understand well what kind of person she is," Izumu-kun said. "That woman... she won't miss a crucial timing."

"You really get it."

"But she's here, huh?"

"What? Want a revenge match?"

"No, as I said, I don't do that anymore. But..." Izumu-kun spoke after a pause. "I think it'd be for the best if they didn't get to meet."

".....? Mr. Fox and Aikawa-san? Why?"

"Who knows....."

"Who knows? That's vague."

"As I told you before, I don't have any parents. However, I think I somewhat know what parents are."

"Yeah."

"And from what my instincts tell me, Mr. Fox isn't not a parent." It was a calm voice without any emotion. "In every sense of the word, that person isn't a parent. That person isn't the type to be able to raise someone."

".....That's, I get that, but..."

"Can't raise, can't teach, and... doesn't care. I mean, hasn't he mostly forgotten about his child? I haven't even heard him utter the word *daughter* once, you know?"

"Yeah....."

I also felt like I hadn't heard it.

From what I knew, he only used the word *daughter* to refer to Aikawa-san once.

"That person is indifferent about these kinds of things. Rather than indifferent... he's monomaniacal. The reverse side of a monomaniac. He focuses so much on one thing that he can't see at all what's around him. You know, it was the same last month. The assistant professor and the immortal girl, even though these two continued to feel for him, Mr. Fox had completely forgotten about them until you brought them up, didn't he?"

"He did."

"Normally, that's not possible, is it?"

"Normally, it's not."

Aikawa Jun...

For Mr. Fox, he probably settled everything with Aikawa-san long ago, ten years ago. That man probably doesn't dwell on the past.

No, not just the past, but the present and the future too.

For that man, the past, present, and future are all one and the same.

There's only the end.

The words "raising a child" aren't too fitting next to the words"end of the world."

"Right, that person doesn't fuss over the process. The assistant professor, the immortal girl, Aikawa Jun, MS-2, and of course, me and Rizumu... Zerozaki Hitoshiki too, we're nothing more than waypoints to pass through one by one."

"........Izumu-kun."

Izumu-kun was in front of us, alone. Houko-chan and I were following him with our hands held. It looked like he knew

where he was going as he advanced with no doubt to his steps.

I've thought about this before, but... weren't Izumu-kun and Zerozaki acquainted? Of course, I barely talked about anything related to the *Killing Names* with Zerozaki, so it's not like I heard it directly from him, but there were a lot of those kinds of remarks... and Izumu-kun also told the fox-masked man about Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The meaning of that, wouldn't it change everything.....?

It's just my intuition, but...

The reason Izumu-kun why came to this academy... isn't that somehow related to Zerozaki Hitoshiki?

It's just my intuition, but there's proof.

Three days ago.

At Izumu-kun's apartment, when the fox-masked man appointed not Zerozaki Hitoshiki but me, this Nonsense User, as his enemy, Izumu-kun looked strangely irritated.

Rather than irritated, displeased.

And the words Izumu-kun said.

"Onii-san and Zerozaki Hitoshiki are completely different."

Completely different.

Not the same...

"........By the way Izumu-kun."

"What?"

"From those decisive steps, you clearly seem to have a destination in mind, but where are we going?"

"The gymnasium."

"Huh. Why?"

"The Miotsukushi sisters said it earlier. 'Aikawa Jun will soon arrive at the second gymnasium, professional killer who experienced death once. We need to kill her in that simple maze. We will be the one to stop your retirement by force, Niounomiya siblings.' They said those kinds of small fry lines at the start."

"Hmm."

Small fry... I don't think that was the case.

Well, the opponent was Izumu-kun.

If it's a concussion, at least I won't have to be their opponent tonight, so I can rest easy for now.

.....

Come to think of it, we left the Miotsukushi sisters to Emoto-san who's in the enemy camp, didn't we?

I wonder if it was okay to leave it to her.....

"But I see. No wonder you can walk without any hesitation. I'm reassured, I thought that you might have been taking the 'If the dog walks, he'll find a stick' approach."

"Of course not. I can't do such useless things when I'm tired."

"That's right. And naturally, you got the directions to the second gymnasium from the sisters."

"No, but I think it's probably this way."

I kicked him from behind.

Izumu-kun rolled down a set of stairs.

".....Onii-chan. I think you know this well, but that person is a ferocious professional killer."

Houko-chan had a fed up expression on her face.

Naturally, Izumu-kun landed cleanly and, on the way up, complained "Hey, hey, what are you doing all of a sudden?" It seems he didn't even recognize it as an attack. Houko-chan and I went down the stairs too and we lined up on the landing.

"Izumu-kun."

"What?"

"......If we're heading towards the gymnasium, we need to get out of the building first."

"I see."

"We can't go up stairs if we want to exit the building."

"Heh. Pretty smart."

"Izumu-kun."

"What?"

"Go in the back."

If possible, while he was in the back, I wanted him to go

somewhere else with Ichirizuka Konomi's *Space Creator*.

I swear……

What were we doing getting even more lost?

Which floor are we on in the first place?

I remembered about Hime-chan's *strings* in my backpack. If I remembered correctly, I once did some rappelling with those *strings* before…. well, maybe Houko-chan and Izumu-kun could jump off even without the *strings*, but I didn't want to. Therefore, let's hold off that idea until someone brings it up. It was also a secret that I had these *strings*.

But the information that Aikawa-san is in the gymnasium is in itself a good find. I'm sure that Moeta-kun was with her too. Since a gymnasium is a building that stands out quite a bit in a school, it wasn't bad as a meeting spot. Since there were so few opponents (if you asked me, we could remove Emoto-san from that amount too. That person was probably no one's enemy, she's just a *healer*), so there was already no meaning in acting separately.

That being said…….

This place really was a maze.

Breaking through our guide, Noise-kun (literally breaking through, damn it) might have been a mistake after all. That person always goes too far with everything she does…

And.

I see **if that's the case**.

This is about as good a time as any.

The small fries were eliminated.

The actors are all here.

And most of all…

The daughter's failure is the father's failure.

Regardless of whether he had been expelled from causality…

The host should be the one to guide the guests.

"**Yo, my enemy.**"

After going further down the stairs, the fox-masked man was there.

As expected,

He always knew when to show up.

He wouldn't miss the crucial point.

Really, both the father and daughter liked to have us wait.

"Are you enjoying the party?"

"I haven’t done anything yet."

"Then..."

The fox-masked man said.

"...follow me. **For you who has done absolutely nothing so far, I will finally let you do something**."

0

When thinking about the future, we assume the past.
In most cases, people call the past the future.

1

Six years ago...
I wonder what I wanted to become.
I wonder what I wanted to do to Kunagisa.
I wonder what in the world I wanted to do.
I wanted to break her.
I wanted to kill her.
I wanted to ruin her.
I wanted to reject her.
I wanted to love her.
I probably wanted to become a hero.
I was a child who wanted to become an ally of justice.
By protecting Kunagisa Tomo.
Turning the Kunagisa Syndicate against me.
I didn't have self-awareness, but...
If you asked me back then, I'd have said it was merely my plan, but likely, by protecting Kunagisa Tomo, I was trying to digest something inside me.
Digest, eliminate, erase.
I tried to forget.
It was for both revenge and atonement.
In the end...
At first, it was my little sister.
I don't think that Kunagisa Tomo is a substitute.
I don't think she's my little sister's substitute.
For me, she's the one and only.

However...
I destroyed her.
I killed her.
I ruined her.
I rejected her.
I couldn't love her.
Kunagisa Tomo was...
Much bigger than I had thought.
She was an exception.
I didn't understand that at the time.
I didn't understand it.
Because I didn't understand, I was scared.
I was scared of Kunagisa Tomo.
I didn't run away because I lost.
I ran away because I was scared.
I ran away.
Ran away forever.
Ran away anywhere.
However... I...

I did the same thing at the place I ran away to...

"Kukukuh."
The fox-masked man,
Looking at us, he laughed happily.
Yamiguchi Houko and Niounomiya Izumu... looking at me, he laughed.
"Quite a party. Having the first and second ranked *Killing Names* at your side, huh? Even I didn't have this many comrades when I was nineteen."
"……..You were probably lacking in popularity," I said. "That or natural virtue, I guess."
"Whether you have that kind of thing or not, it's the same."

The fox-masked man turned his back on us.

He started going down the stairs towards the second gymnasium, not even checking to see if we were following behind him.

Obviously, we didn't have a choice.

He understood that we didn't have any choice.

"....."

However...

He didn't have a single word for Izumu-kun, his past subordinate. I was half-expecting it, but that indifference, I can't help but think of it as abnormal. No matter what, it can't be unsurprising for the fox-masked man that Izumu-kun is here...

.....Is it unsurprising?

Don't tell me... was that why he sent me to Fukuoka in the first place?

".....Onii-chan."

Houko-chan whispered to me.

"Is he your enemy?"

"More accurately... his enemy is me. If you put Miiko-san aside."

"....He seems full of gaps," Houko-chan said. "Now, of course, I wouldn't kill in front of Onii-chan, but making him unable to act should be possible."

"....."

"What should I do?"

".....No." I strongly grasped Houko-chan's hand. "Please don't. He's someone who we shouldn't act carelessly against."

"However, it would be quite a problem if he were to join with the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Judging from what Onii-chan told me, that person probably possesses the talent to draw out the most out of a person, to draw out the talent within someone."

"That would be..."

That would be my opposite.

I obstruct people's talent.

"At any rate, Houko-chan. And also Izumu-kun. I want you two to hold on a bit more before acting."

"Hmm. Acting, huh?"

Izumu-kun laughed at my words.

"Hey, Mr. Fox." And he called out to the fox-masked man's back. "I honestly don't have much interest in you."

"....."

"It's just that Rizumu took a liking to you, and since we share the same body, I had no other choice than to obey you, but, that being said, it's not like I'm not grateful to you. But, you know, what's up with making this Onii-san your *enemy* instead of Zerozaki Hitoshiki? If this is the case, then **what Rizumu did**, what was that for?"

"……Ah."

The fox-masked man suddenly turned around.

And after all this time, as if he just remembered,

"It's been some time, Izumu."

He said.

"……!"

"I'm sorry for dragging you out of retirement. At one point, I thought about respecting your and Rizumu's wishes and leaving you alone, but I had some unforeseen circumstances on my side, so I needed your power."

"Needed, you said?"

"Yes. It's fine even as an *enemy*. Be at my side."

He said those arrogant words naturally.

And then he started walking again.

Honestly, hearing that conversation, I was trembling with fear thinking that Izumu-kun would riot. Now that I think of it, I saw Rizumu-chan talking to the fox-masked man, but I've never seen Izumu-kun do so. That too was half-expected, but... It wasn't a harmonious relationship at all.

However, the part about unforeseen circumstances bothered me.

What was it?

Was it... about Aikawa-san?

"Um... Mr. Fox."

"What is it, my enemy?"

"Did you already meet Aikawa-san?"

"....."

The fox-masked man didn't even turn back.

"What? Is she here?"

"I-is she here, you ask... really?"

"I just, because you seemed to want to go to the second gymnasium, I came out to guide you. Hmm, then my daughter is heading towards the second gymnasium? That means I need to slightly change the plan again."

".....Is that all you have to say?"

"'Is that all you have to say'. Hmm." The fox-masked man said. "I wonder... was there something else I should have said? That woman, my daughter has already been expelled from causality just like me, so she has no impact on the Story's end."

"Aikawa-san was.....?"

Expelled from causality?

What is he saying?

For someone possessing that much presence.

"Isn't that why she's a contractor (alternative)?"

"....."

"If you were originally powerless like me, it would be fine, but for the one who was perfect from the start, for my daughter who was originally the strongest, to be expelled from causality just doesn't make sense. **Despite being the strongest, she can't do anything alone**. Well, in my daughter's case, more than being expelled, it's like she was created bearing the outside of the Story in mind, so I guess it's natural."

"The outside.....?"

"Didn't we talk about it before... about how my daughter was the next approach after Kuchiha? **An existence made to destroy the Story**."

The next approach.

He used that word.

"A failure, and a big one at that. Thanks to that, I was expelled from causality, and now we're here. I've done a lot of things since my exile, but that failure still hurts. It still echoes now. I don't intend to start over, not even one bit. However, even if I wanted to start over, it wouldn't be that easy."

"Why is that?"

"Because the connection between me and my daughter was completely severed. It's called insulation."

Insulation...

I don't know when, but I used that word to describe Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

His existence was an insulator.

If so, am I the same?

Am I an insulator?

"No, you're not." The fox-masked man said. "Your existence is far from an insulator. You **fixed the connection between me and my daughter**. Using yourself as an intermediary, using yourself as a catalyst."

"....."

"I don't care about someone like my daughter, but your existence has meaning. That's why you are my enemy."

".....What a selfish thing to say."

I said.

There was no small amount of irritation included.

"Not caring about your own daughter."

"'Not caring about your own daughter'. Hmm." The fox-masked man laughed, sounding bored. "If I were to respond to those words, what parents do with their children is their own business. After all, she was originally a part of me."

"She's not your biological daughter, is she?"

The three had raised her.

And she was the child of none of them.

Aikawa-san...

"Aikawa-san is your sister's child, isn't she?"

"**My sister's child and my child**."

The fox-masked man said.

"**Though which sister it was was unclear until the very end**."

"……? ……!?"

I didn't understand for a moment, and then I understood in an instant.

"Y-you... with your sister..."

"What? Didn't my daughter say that much? What, did she hide it... oh, that girl. Kukukuh. Then, shall I tell you something pleasant? My sisters... both of them had the same name, though the characters were different. Saitou Jun and Saitou Jun." (TL: both are different from the characters used for Aikawa Jun and Aikawa Junya)

"……!"

"The only thing she inherited from Aikawa was his last name."

".....That's crazy."

"It's nothing to get surprised about really. It's just different from a parent's perspective. For them, they were two daughters, but for me they were two big sisters... Kukukuh. Wouldn't you understand, Izumu?"

"……Keh."

Izumu-kun cursed.

"Don't treat me like I'm the same."

"We're the same. There's nothing different between me and you. Oops... this might have been a bit too stimulating of a conversation for a child like you, Yamiguchi Houko-chan."

Being called out,

Houko-chan turned to the side with a frown.

"Looks like she hates me," laughed the fox-masked man as if it was nothing.

"Ah, right, right... my enemy. One thing, first I need to apologize for one thing. Umm... what was it, right, right. That

woman, Nanananami Nanami---"

"…….Don't you mean Asano Miiko?"

"Yeah, that was it. Well, either is fine. Sorry for having involved that woman, Asano Miiko. I regret it from the bottom of my heart."

"……."

It was an unbelievably shameless thing to say.

I didn't even feel like retorting.

"I think you may have already received the antidote from Doctor Sonoki, but perhaps you haven't. If you haven't---"

"I've received it," I answered. "However, even after receiving it, I'm not going to forgive you."

"'I'm not going to forgive you'. Hmm. That's fine, whether I'm forgiven or not, in the end, it's the same. But, well, for this case, it was really unnecessary. Rather than accelerating, it almost paused things, which is far from my objective. That's why I asked you to let me apologize."

"……."

"If you ask me to get on my knees, I'll do it. I wouldn't want **this boring strife** to get in the way of our match."

"Boring you say…." I felt my voice tremble. "How selfish can you get… who in the world do you think you are?"

"Same for you. Also, I didn't think you **knew**."

The fox-masked man said with a flat tone.

"I didn't think you'd ever get the chance to find out about **the connection between me and you**, **so I thought I would teach you**. However, **it seems you already know, don't you?**"

"……."

I was attacked by Kino-san on the sixteenth.

At that point, Miiko-san got infected with the poison.

And certainly…

At that point, I didn't know anything.

I only put things together…

When Hikari-san, or perhaps Teruko-san, told me about the relationship between Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun at that

hotel.

It was inevitable that I would become the fox-masked man's enemy.

It was already the predetermined destiny.

I realized that.

"It took me an awfully long time to grasp what you were talking about with that maid in the hotel. It seems you were quite careful, weren't you? It's inconvenient without Rizumu at times like these. In the end, assassins are assassins, the right people in the right places. **I only learned that you knew about that** yesterday. I already figured you would be researching me, but it was beyond my expectations that you would reach there. I managed to revise my plans, but it was already after Noise went to see you at that point. The festival before the party."

".....What are you doing, trying to play with words?"

"Well, even so, the *poison* that Raichi transferred was considerably weak, so nothing big will happen. For someone with a strong vitality, it'll fade in about a week. When you return, you should make her drink it quickly. She'll probably recover in no time."

"……Really, you don't care about anything but yourself."

"I don't even care about myself. Isn't that the same for you?"

"I'm different. I'm not like you."

"We're the same. But, well, you're still young, huh?"

The fox-masked man said.

"But there are also things you can only do while you're young... That's a lesson. You should remember it, Houko-chan."

"……Don't refer to me so casually."

Houko-chan responded, not ignoring him this time.

And she did so without mercy.

"It's as you said, I hate people like you."

"Ho," The fox-masked man shrugged. "That's weird. Normally, I'm pretty popular with young girls. Or maybe you're

too young, **Houko-chan**. Don't you see my charm?"

"People like you... people who don't have anything they want to protect, I hate them."

"That's the line of a *Yamiguchi*. Not fitting for a runaway girl." Kukukuh, the fox-masked man laughed. "Don't let yourself be washed away by your emotions. The thing that you should float on is destiny, nothing else."

"If you want to see the end of the Story, you should just commit suicide. It's a pain if someone who's already dead is still wandering around. Your existence is nothing more than a eyesore for everyone."

"You're really sharp, Houko-chan. If you keep being such a tomboy, **the Onii-chan you love so much** won't care about you."

"....."

Houko-chan went silent.

What... isn't she going to argue back?

Since they're siblings, it's natural that Houko-chan liked Moeta-kun, and it was already obvious that there was no way Moeta-kun would hate Houko-chan.

Weird.

Hmm. That would mean that the fox-masked man had already grasped that Moeta-kun was here. Well, since Houko-chan was here, I guess it was normal for him to be here too?

We finally got out of the building

"This way, we're going around from the back," said the fox-masked man as he proceeded alongside a flower bed that was set up near the school building. Since there was no one to take care of it anymore, it was a mess, but even so, there was a fair amount of flowers blooming.

The flowers were blooming.

"If we come out here, there's the gymnasium, still..."

This time, the fox-masked man seemed to be talking to himself, his words addressed to no one.

"It's strange."

"Strange... what do you mean?"

"You guys, you're heading toward the second gymnasium for your own reasons, right?"

"That's, yeah....."

To meet up with Aikawa-san.

"Right. And my daughter is heading towards the second gymnasium for her own reasons. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah....."

I looked at Izumu-kun.

Izumu-kun looked irritated, emitting an aura that signaled he didn't want to be talked to, so I immediately returned my gaze to in front of me.

Well, we couldn't know the reason just from the Miotsukushi sisters' words, but since it's that person, I'm sure Aikawa-san has a clear reason to move.

"And..."

The fox-masked man said.

"I, for my own reasons, am heading towards the second gymnasium."

"....Eh?"

"I must slightly change the plan, isn't that what I said? Since you seemed to want to go to the second gymnasium, I offered you my guidance, but to be completely honest, I also have a reason to guide you, to guide my enemy to the second gymnasium."

"....."

"Isn't it strange? Even though our wills are all different, in the end, everyone is converging towards a single point."

"Then from the start..."

"I was planning to guide you to the gymnasium from the start. You were the ones to crash into Noise, weren't you?"

"....."

"Really, you do such outrageous things. Although, after that, I didn't have any words for the actions of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Go meddle a bit if you have some free time, I only gave an

order of that level."

"That's... random."

"In the first place, they're not the kind of people who listen to orders. The Miotsukushi sisters, for example... no, I guess it's pointless. Anyway, the second gymnasium."

Turning at the corner,

Suddenly, a gigantic building appeared.

It seemed that was the second gymnasium.

It looked more like an indoor stadium than a gymnasium, but... near the top of this tall building, "Sumiyuri Academy Second Gymnasium" was clearly written.

Taking a big detour, we went around to the back of the building.

And in front of the door to the gymnasium,

"Izumu."

The fox-masked man said.

"You can break it. It's locked and I don't have the key."

"…….Spare me." Izumu-kun said, without looking at the fox-masked man. "If I do that now, I might accidentally smash your face."

"I see. We can't do anything about that." The fox-masked man said in a flat voice. "Then, my enemy. The anti-lock blade you have, could I request it?"

"……Why?"

How does he know that I have it? But instead of letting the question trail off, I silently pulled out my lock-picking blade and handed it to the fox-masked man. He looked at it first, curiously admiring it.

"Hmm... I see."

"What is it?"

"To think that this knife passed from Zerokzaki Hitoshiki and found its way to you. I'm deeply impressed."

"I didn't know this was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's."

"Formerly, probably. When my daughter **killed** Zerozaki Hitoshiki, she acquired it, as if stripping him off. It also passed

by the great thief, Ishimaru Kouta's hands, but, in the end, it became yours. That's interesting."

"....."

"Outstanding tools choose their owners."

".....It's surely just a coincidence."

"'It's surely just a coincidence.' Hmm. You still say things like that... that being said, this knife originally came from the hands of a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, Furuyari Zukin."

".....Is that so?"

"Yes. Zukin also crafted *Mind Render*, for example. In that field, he is a famous old man, but... no, it's fine. Let's put that topic off for later."

The fox-masked man unlocked the door and gave the knife back to me. I put it away and quickly followed him to the inside of the gymnasium.

Upon entering, we found ourselves in a small room, similar to a waiting room. It was probably the back of the stage present in most gymnasiums. From the curtains, I could see to the other side of the stairs in the back, so it's surely something like that.

"What time is it now?"

"What?"

"Time, the time, what time is it?"

"Uh....." I checked my watch. The watch I received from Hime-chan. "Eleven past fifty....."

"'Eleven past fifty.' Hmm. Of course, it’s the afternoon."

"Of course, it’s the afternoon."

A lot of time had passed without me noticing. Since today was the thirtieth of September, there were less than ten minutes left...

In less than ten minutes.

"In less than ten minutes, it'll be October."

".....Yes."

"My enemy. I like September."

".....What?"

What was he saying?

So suddenly.

"Because people don't die."

"....."

"And I hate October. Too many people die in October. I wonder why. In my life, it's constantly been like that. Up to now, no one around me had died in September. But even if you live through September, only a few can live through October."

".....Perhaps that's..."

That was...

The meaning of Kino-san's words?

Even though there was a risk of being killed, was that the reason he sent me to Izumu-kun?

.....Stupid.

It was too stupid.

Isn't that just statistics?

It didn't serve as proof.

Did he base his life on that.....?

But certainly, no one died.

Today too, no one had died yet.

The fortune-teller, Himena Maki, died in August.

And apparently the conflict inside the Kunagisa Syndicate had seen almost no deaths since we entered this month. Aikawa-san, who was also supposed to be dead, was living as if it was natural.

That, that kind of thing...

It's obviously just a coincidence.

Just chance.

"Now."

Kukukuh, after laughing,

"I wonder how many will be left in the *Thirteen Stairs* by the end of next month. And, my enemy, the people around you too."

"....."

"This way." Saying that, the fox-masked man climbed the

small stairs in the back. "It'll be time soon."

"……Yes."

However... even the fox-masked man, did he hate people dying? No, it didn't seem to have that nuance. Rather than hating it, he said it like it was inconvenient.

Inconvenient.

It's bad for his convenience.

That means he is the worst.

…….It was now eleven past fifty-one.

The four of us came out on the stage.

The curtain wasn't lowered.

It was an immense gymnasium. There were even spectator seats on both sides. As I thought, it looked more like a stadium than a gymnasium. Seeing all that from on top of the stage was somewhat dazzling. Even though we weren't particularly high up, it felt like I was floating. Like I was falling, that kind of feeling.

The fox-masked man sat in the middle of the stage and crossed his legs. Arriving here, he took his fox mask off . Without saying anything, I sat down next to the fox-masked man. Houko-chan sat down next to me. Izumu-kun didn't sit down, but stood at a distance from us.

Facing the stage.

On the other side, facing the stage...

An iron door was there.

It was closed.

As if obstructing, it was closed.

As if protecting, it was closed.

It was quite dark in the gymnasium, but unlike inside the school building where I was earlier, the windows were large enough to allow for no problems in terms of lighting, and once your eyes got used to it, it wasn't too dark.

"Now, for this month's climax."

Eventually, the fox-masked man said.

"To finish, let me say some boring words."

"Boring..."

"About my previous failures. My enemy, it seems you really like them... about my daughter."

"....."

"The next approach after Kuchiha, the next stage. I had two colleagues... Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya."

"Kajou Akira is..." I said, bearing Izumu-kun's words in mind, a former member of the *Thirteen Stairs*. "Already dead. I heard from Aikawa-san."

"Yeah. That is, in fact, true."

The fox-masked man easily acquiesced.

"However, he still lives on inside me."

"....."

"Despite being dead, he's the only one to stay alive inside me. The others, everyone, when they die, they remain dead. There were many examples like Kigamine and Kuchiha, who were dead inside me even though they were alive, but..."

".....From hearing you speak, I think you're cold towards humans."

"'I think you're cold towards humans.' Hmm. Maybe. However, before that was really the case, I had friends at the very least."

"Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya."

"Yeah," the fox-masked man said. "About this, my enemy, I think I already told you and Izumu, but just in case, since Houko-chan is here for the first time, I will resume my explanation. About the immortal girl that is Madoka Kuchiha----"

"I heard."

Houko-chan said briefly.

"Please don't pay any mind to me."

".....A good answer. But the more I am hated, the more I want to care about you. I'll absolutely explain. That's already decided."

"....."

This part was like Aikawa-san.....

"The immortal girl. The girl outside of causality, **not involved with anyone or anything**, that existence which was like a misprint. It taught me the existence of the Story known as the world. In the end, I couldn't get any more than that from Kuchiha, but I had a hint. That's why, next I planned for the collapse of causality."

"Collapse.....?"

"I judged that collapsing would be the same as ending. However, I was wrong. I was nearly about to reach the point of smashing causality into pieces, but that didn't have anything to do with the Story's end. It was a big failure."

"A big failure and the results."

"The results... I died, Junya died, Akira died and, at that time, *the existence I created to collapse causality*, my daughter, died as well."

"....."

"However, my daughter and I survived. Even though we died, even though we should have died, we survived. Now... whether that was in September or in October....." The fox-masked man showed an expression of being lost in thought for a bit. "Well, the price of having survived was big. My daughter and I got expelled from causality and ended scattered apart, severed."

That's the border.

I know up to that point.

"Nevertheless, my enemy. How should I say this... even I have trouble putting it in words, but there are unexpected parts about the past where you feel like praising yourself. Actions you did without reason, just on a whim, but after living longer and looking back on them, surprisingly, you're shocked at how they almost seem like clairvoyance."

".....What are you talking about?"

"For example, Kigamine and Kuchiha. Those two, who I already considered dead, I failed to finish them off, that's how

it was. That was a failure, no matter how you think of it, a failure, a regrettable mistake. However, thanks to that mistake, you and I were able to meet, my enemy."

"....."

"Of course, with Back Nozzle, even if those two weren't there, you and I would have met, but as those two were the most fitting for our meeting, there is no mistake that it was accelerated."

Accelerating.

Accelerating the Story.

"And now, once again. My daughter, despite being a failed product in my eyes, she played a role in your development."

"A role... it wasn't something that small."

Thanks to her...

How much had I accelerated?

"And one more thing, the organization that was necessary in creating my daughter, *the existence that would collapse causality*.... no, I should say facility, that facility now known as the ER3 System's MS-2 branch, for it **to be useful one more time**. Who could have thought? Even if someone had, it would at most have been Junya..."

"Being useful one more time....."

"Don't play dumb, my enemy."

The fox-masked man laughed provocatively.

"**The place of fate between me and you, right?**"

"....."

"You should already know," The fox-masked man said. "People who have somewhat of a connection with me, who were already expelled from causality, every one of them is crazy. The *Thirteen Stairs* are, in other words, a gathering of that sort of people. However, even with the *Thirteen Stairs*, before meeting you, I haven't even gathered half of them. I wonder why."

"For you... isn't it because it's hard to form a strong connection when you have been expelled from causality?"

"Exactly! And under such circumstances, I couldn't measure how strong the connection between you and me was. For me, you are without a doubt an *enemy*, but for the current me who can't even break the connection of *ally*, I wonder if my *enemy* will be able to stay my *enemy*. No, I already know the answer. I already experienced it. It can't possibly stay like that. Thinking of what ties the connection between me and you, it is, at most, my daughter, Aikawa Jun."

As I tied the connection between Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

Aikawa Jun tied the connection between me and Saitou Takashi.

However...

Just with that, it wasn't enough.

"That's not enough."

"……..That's why... Miiko-san."

"No, that's, well, something like insurance. Like I said earlier, I already knew from way before that. I've been looking forward to telling you about this for a while now, but... that's fine, everything is fine. Even that seems trivial. Really, why, why, did MS-2 play a role at this point... I didn't expect it."

"……."

What the fox-masked man wanted to say...

I already knew.

I knew.

I knew.

I knew.

However, I didn't want to think about it.

However, I didn't want to remember it.

Don't say any more than that.

Don't put it in words.

Her...

Don't say her name.

"Ten years ago, I left the ER2, what's now known as the ER3 system. Since I had died, I had no other choice but to leave, but

those academic idiots... those mad lunatics **continued the MS-2**. Even though Junya, Akira and I were already gone, they continued the research with our remains."

"....."

"There was no way they could do anything without us. Needless to say, for those guys, that was something that even young kids could understand, but, well, it's not like I don't understand their feelings. My daughter was the strongest."

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

"Aiming to make thunder fall twice in the same place, I guess. Rather, for them, Junya, Akira and I were probably just eyesores for them. That's why they advanced frantically with agile footwork. However," The fox-masked man said while smiling as if he was watching a child's prank. "Without us, there was almost nothing they could do. Because the documents, the documents were all inside our heads. In other words, even I could only replicate one third of my daughter. Not to mention the MS-2, they couldn't do anything. Making light of them, I left them alone."

"You left them alone?"

"Unlike with Kigamine and Kuchiha, **I didn't have enough attachment to feel sympathy for them** and, speaking honestly..."

"What is it?"

"I forgot them."

"....."

"Don't look at me like that. From what I heard, aren't you pretty forgetful too?"

"You far surpass me in that field....."

Also...

I couldn't forget what I wanted to forget.

I don't even have to think back, I remember.

"Setting that aside..." The fox-masked man continued without showing any guilt. "But that MS-2... a few years ago,

they produced a miracle. **A recreation of my daughter that should have been impossible**. That..."

"**You know that better than anyone**."

I had no other choice than to remain silent.

Words wouldn't come out.

Not even one bit of nonsense would come out.

Against the fox-masked man who had yet to name himself, even if I used it, it almost definitely wouldn't work. The effect wouldn't show.

"**That miracle could have happened** only because you became a student of the ER Program. That's what I judged. That's what I analyzed. You **possess the talent of creating miracles**."

"You're expecting too much of me. Why do you and Aikawa-san overestimate people like that? I haven't done anything--"

"**It feels to me that not doing anything is your talent**," The fox-masked man said. "Isn't that something you realized this time?"

"That I realized....."

"I started messing with you in earnest on the 16th of September, the day I sent Raichi to your hospital. And all the way until today, you probably **haven't done anything about it**. Maybe you did a few things, but concretely, **you did nothing**."

"....."

"Despite not doing anything... this situation. Many people became your allies. Various people have saved you. In this past half-month, how many people have helped you? Including Izumu and Houko-chan, who are present here."

"....."

"The same as me," The fox-masked man said. "But despite not having been expelled from causality, despite not doing

anything, I can't take it."

"I haven't done... anything."

"You didn't. Even now, and even when you were in the ER Program, **when you were running riot alongside my daughter's successor**, **you didn't do anything**."

"……Setting now aside."

I was barely able to argue back.

"The period when I was a student in the Program is already in the past. The current me has no relation to it."

"Though you aren't really thinking for a second that it has no relation to you. You already understand it, don't you? However, you have a connection with my daughter, that wouldn't have been the case with Zerozaki Hitoshiki. I'm happy that you are my enemy."

"……I had no idea that **she was Aikawa-san's successor**. Until I heard that you **did some outrageous things** in MS-2, I didn't know about it. Meeting Aikawa-san was just a coincidence. And meeting **her** too."

"That's the connection between you and me."

The fox-masked man said as if he was bringing things to a conclusion.

"That has confirmed that you're my enemy even further."

"……"

"With that, were you able to understand? Houko-chan."

Skipping over me, the fox-masked man asked Houko-chan. She wore a truly bored expression.

"What a selfish monologue."

She said.

"In other words, your past and Onii-chan's past are connected at a single point. It's just that, right? Getting this excited from just that... it's on the same level as bragging about having famous people as relatives. Whether your daughter is a common acquaintance with Onii-chan or whether your daughter's successor is Onii-chan's friend, what does that matter?"

"It doesn't."

The fox-masked man said.

"Kukukuh. Being hated that much, I'm really taking a liking to you. Houko-chan, how about it, want to join the *Thirteen Stairs*?"

".....Wouldn't that make it have too many members?"

"Doesn't bother me. I would only have to change the *Thirteen Stairs* to the *Fourteen Stairs*. I would engrave Houko-chan's name in the fourteenth place. It's just a number I decided on randomly. Also, Noise looks like he won't be useful for a while....."

"....As I said, I hate you... no, hold on for a moment."

"Did you change your mind?"

".....My name in the fourteenth place... is that what you said?"

"Yeah. That's what I said."

Then... **who is in the thirteenth place**?"

To Houko-chan's words...

Izumu-kun and I shivered.

Right, even including the retired number, Kajou Akira, there were only twelve names listed on the list in that envelope. We thought half-mindedly that it would be thirteen with the fox-masked man, but **there was no way that was the case**.

".....Whoops. I let something slip....." The fox-masked man wore a frown, unusually. "Me, of all people... good grief. Even though I made it a secret."

"A secret....."

"For the small toys sold with foods, it's natural for there to be a secret item. I have always been a man of dramatic effect, I always have a surprise for guests to enjoy. The *Thirteen Stairs* is **twelve people plus one**. Well, not thirteen people."

"Then the last one."

I had a bad feeling.

I was having a bad feeling.

In the first place, I knew..

There was no way I wouldn't notice.

However, I purposely pretended to not notice, to not know, to not understand.

Even when Izumu-kun asked about the number of people, I deliberately ended the topic, using light words. Saying things like how it wasn't that big of a deal.

I mean... I.

At that point, I knew.

What the fox-masked man did in MS-2...

I knew.

"Though my name was erased from the ER3 System, I have a lot of old friends who are willing to help me out. They are quite flexible. Of course, that includes people from MS-2 as well. The people from the *Thirteen Stairs*, they called you *Ii-chan*, didn't they? That is, of course, because I told them to."

"....."

"You probably thought that I was making fun of Kunagisa Tomo, but that's wrong. And, of course, I wasn't pointing at your sister either. **There is another one, isn't there? Someone that called you *Ii-chan*...**"

The hints were scattered throughout.

But.

But she...

But she's dead.

Right in front of me.

She burned to death in a deflagration.

She completely died.

"If you say she died, my daughter and myself also died ten years ago. For me, and for you as well, it doesn't matter whether they've died or not. Whether they're dead or alive, it's the same thing. What matters is..."

The fox-masked man,

Grabbed the masked by his side.

He put it on again.

"Whether they are living in your heart, isn't it?"

The fox-masked man said.

"**My daughter's successor, is she still living on in your heart? Then**..."

Clank, there was a sound.

From the front the door.

The front door was about to be opened.

From the gap came light.

Light suddenly poured in.

"Out of time, huh?"

Kukukuh, the fox-masked man laughed.

"It's the ten year reunion between me and my daughter. The originally impossible reunion. I think no one's expecting it, but if we embraced, it would make for a perfect picture."

"Aikawa-san."

From the other side of the door came two people.

Aikawa Jun and Ishinagi Moeta.

We could see their silhouettes from our side, so we understood, but... even though we were in the middle of the night, even for those two, it would take a few moments for their eyes to adjust since they just came inside.

But those two are fine for now.

Those two... I wonder what kind of conversation they had.

The grim reaper and the contractor.

And, in the first place, why the gymnasium...

"……!?"

Behind those two.

One other person was there.

There was one more silhouette.

A childlike, small silhouette.

A baseball cap worn on the opposite side.

A yukata... and a fancy fox mask.

The one I saw in the parking lot,

Was here.

"Eh... huh.....?"

And, strangely enough, Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun didn't seem to notice it.

Even though a figure was standing right behind them, as if not paying any mind to it, they stepped inside the gymnasium.

As if they were moving together.

As if those three came here together.

With them being that close, I couldn't think otherwise.

To the point where I couldn't understand anything else, next to those two,

That girl wearing a yukata was there.

However, that wasn't the case.

Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun...

They hadn't noticed the presence of the girl in the yukata.

"A... Aikawa-san.....? Moeta-kun.....?"

I couldn't even put any power into the voice that called out to them.

What is it... this sensation.

This feeling... I know it.

Disgusting.

Frightening.

Scary.

Scary scary.

Scary scary scary.

But...

A tight, nostalgic feeling

Like when I met my sister.

Like when I met Kunagisa.

And... like when I met Kunagisa again.

That pain.

Even though it was painful...

I couldn't accept it.

I was currently having unacceptable emotions.

I was having absurd emotions.
Now,
That I was meeting her...
Meeting her.
What a thing.
If this is a bad dream, please don't wake me up.
"Then, now that the date is almost up, to my daughter's successor... **to my grandchild**, I will give my first order."
The fox-masked man said very perfunctorily.
"Can you hear me... my cute little fox..."

"……**Do as you like**."

That was the signal of the end.
The childish fox mask was wiped away.
The yukata was torn off.
And,
Those arms...
Towards Ishinagi Moeta,
And Aikawa Jun, they extended.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

I screamed.
I screamed as much as my voice could.
And finally, I understood.
That it hadn't ended.
That it had always continued.
And...
And the scene after that,
It ended to the point that it couldn't continue.

This was the end.
The end of the world...
The end of the Story.
There was no continuation, it was over.
I understood that from the bottom of my heart.

This was the Orange Seed.
The red alternative, Omokage Magokoro.
"Party" is the END.

I don't want to make too livid a monologue so I will purposefully use an expression. Er, when you, like, briefly look back at your life, "the world is only filled with bad things, there hasn't been anything good in my life" is the most frank and honest impression, so I find it extremely unpleasant. Very unpleasant. Of course, without that we wouldn't keep living, so there might have been some happy things and some fun things. However, why only those memories easily become hazy is incredibly strange. No, not that. For example, *misfortune* is something that completes itself, so that leaves an impression. However, when we talk about *happiness*, it isn't something that ends itself, it is something that connects to the *future*. No matter how many happy or fun things there were in the past, if you are currently in *misfortune*, that *happiness* is, in the end, nothing more than a part of that *misfortune*. Maybe it's something like that. Looking at it from the other side, no matter how *happy* you are now, your past *misfortune* will never disappear. When you realize that it's a scar that will remain for eternity, you start to regret ever having thought of it from the other side.

I think that using misfortune as a spring to give life your all is, on the contrary, painful. But even then, if you really want to work hard towards something, you will have to face misfortune properly. If you do it carelessly, you'll surprisingly find yourself colluding with it, like "the miserable me is really miserable," and self-hatred and self-intoxication will get mixed in. Well, it's a common situation, but if you were to deny this, you would have no other choice than to use misfortune as a stepping stone. It's really not good to say "do your best" to someone who can't do their best, but if you tell them to, there will be people who won't be able to. So, even if it's a slow climb up the stairs, step by step, I think it'll surely be fine. Just like that, this

has been *Uprooted Radical (Part One): The Thirteen Stairs.*

I feel like I have been in editor in-chief, Ooda Katsushi-sama's, and illustrator in-chief, Take-san's care for a long time, but now that I think of it, it's only been a few years. I am dumbfounded before that thick density. I will put an end to the Zaregoto Series after *Uprooted Radical (Part Two): Overkill Red vs. Orange Seed* and *Uprooted Radical (Part Three): The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User* following the third part, but even after that conclusion, I want to work with these two people again. The readers too, please accompany me as well. See you later.
Nisio Isin